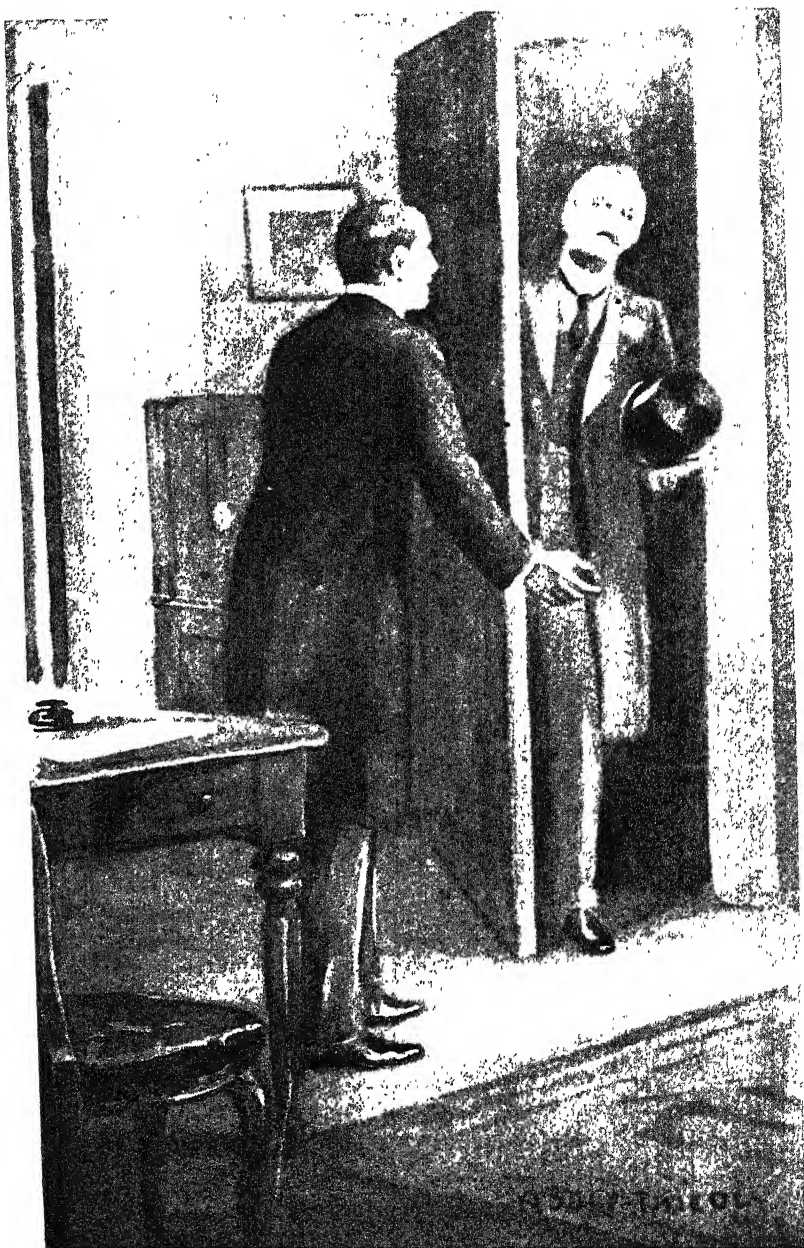


PAUL, THE SAGE

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Love, the Foe.
Crime on Canvass.



"Mr. Rossiter rose and bowed as Beggarstaff entered." (Chapter IX.)

Paul the Sage

[Frontispiece]

PAUL, THE SAGE

By

FRED M. WHITE

Author of "The Corner House," "The Slave of Silence," etc

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PAUL THE SAGE

CHAPTER I

THE YELLOW GIRL

THE door of No. 1, Tyburn Square, was painted black, with bell, letter-box, and massive knocker enamelled in vivid scarlet. In a few weeks' time this portal had passed from the limbo of conventional thresholds into the picturesque popularity of evening newspaper records. This spells fame in an age when genius means an infinite capacity for making money.

In less than two months all that was best and brightest in society had passed beyond the flare of lampblack and vermilion. Beyond was a hall, paved and lined with white marble, filled with lemon-trees. Beyond this again was a large room, the walls unpapered, the white boards absolutely bare, and containing no furniture beyond a couple of saddlebag armchairs. The big bay window at the far end was fitted with cathedral glass.

In this primitive fashion Paul Beggarstaff received his clients. At all times and seasons a good fire burned upon the hearth. Ladies came here to have their

fortunes expounded, their lines of life vigorously told, and to get advice upon everything, from the selection of a servant to the backing of a horse.

And yet, two months ago, nobody had heard of Paul Beggarstaff. He did not come in clouds of mystery, there was no flavour of the East about him, his very name had an Anglo-Saxon suggestiveness. He merely claimed certain occult powers, and seldom did he promise in vain.

Beggarstaff was a young man, with pale, scholarly features, an aquiline nose supporting gold-threaded pincenez, and a drooping blonde moustache. There were no magic circles, no black cats, no anything. The very novelty of the thing was one of its great attractions. Surely nobody but a very strong man could afford to dispense with the properties.

Beggarstaff had made his reputation over that case of Lady Summerbright's. The affair is woven into the diaphanous fabric of history by this time. Her ladyship, the loveliest and silliest woman in London, had lost her diamond necklace. *Truth* will tell you that the gaud has a

bloody history of its own. Commercially, the stream of light would have ransomed quite a number of mediaeval kings.

Lord Summerbright, whose literary ability had been throttled by patrician ties, could suggest nothing better than a visit to Beggarstaff, whose original doorway had arrested his cynical attention. With the sublime creed that folly follows, her ladyship went.

She returned with a wonderful story. She was quite certain she had had the dubious delight of an interview with the devil, clad in frock-coat, mathematically pressed trousers, and glasses rimmed with gold. Also her ladyship was quite certain that the father of lies was a graduate of one of our universities.

"James," she declared, "the man is a marvel. He told me everything I had done on that fatal night. Things that happened in my bedroom!"

"Lucky—er—devil," Summerbright murmured.

"No; but really, James. He motioned me into a chair, he actually knew why I came, and then he began to tell me things. I never was so frightened in my life. And he says I dropped my necklace close here as I was getting out of my carriage, and that the same will be found down the drain which is opposite the door."

Summerbright smiled. When a man laughs at a woman in that irritating way she is generally inspired to new and dazzling heights of folly.

"I am going to have that drain searched at once," said her ladyship. And she did.

The necklace was found as Beggarstaff predicted. Within a week the name of Paul Beggarstaff was known from one end of England to another. This was notoriety. But when the Purple Pill King and the greatest Soap Emperor worked the incidents into full-page advertisements, fame followed.

Hundreds of fashionable clients flocked to Tyburn Square. The Sage's prices were trebled, but this only served to increase the crush. Nor could it be denied that Beggarstaff was wonderfully successful with his patients, as he chose to call them. To put the matter tersely, Beggarstaff had become an institution.

It was Saturday afternoon, a day when occult science slacked her bow, and Beggarstaff sat alone. In a Sage his occupation was a prosaic one, and not even the most latitudinarian of critics can exactly regard the *Sporting Times* as literature. The rapid pulse of the electric bell thrilled, and Beggarstaff put the pink sheets aside. A minute later, and a tall figure entered.

"I beg your pardon," said the

intruder, "but I presume you are——"

"Paul Beggarstaff, at your service. You wish to consult me, Sir Peter?"

Sir Peter Mallory looked slightly uncomfortable. He was a handsome young man, with a bronzed face and an eye suggestive of higher things than sighting a choke-bore with a dusky flight of partridge drumming into the September haze. Mallory was a sportsman by environment, an enthusiast and dreamer by instinct.

"If you were a woman," said Beggarstaff, "you could feel more easy. Sit down."

"Woman," Mallory murmured, as he sank into the chair, "can do things sublimely. Honestly, I came here against my better convictions."

"Of course, that's why you *do* come. Just at present you are out of sorts with common honesty. Believing me to be a thorough-paced humbug you come to me as an antidote. Strychnine is a valuable medicine, and Longman is behaving very badly."

"What do you know about Longman?"

"I know he has disappointed you, and yet his pseudo-Socialism is no more meretricious than yours. He has been robbing you in the name of political humanity."

"Over two thousand pounds," Mallory muttered. "I'm sick of

politics. Those fellows are all alike. But I didn't come to talk of that to you."

Beggarstaff smiled slightly.

"No," he said. "You came to discuss a girl. The girl puzzles you."

"How in the name of fortune do you come to know that?"

Beggarstaff gave a lofty wave of his hand. The gesture seemed to imply the triviality of the problem to a mind of wide grasp.

"Suffice it that I do know," the Sage remarked. "The question is: Are you in earnest? Because, if you are not, the matter is likely to lead you into serious trouble. What are your intentions in the matter of the Yellow Girl?"

"Beggarstaff, you are in league with Satan?"

"There are worse syndicates," the Sage said drily. "All the same, you are mistaken. I have no connexion whatever with the firm you mention. Are you serious?"

"I was never more earnest in my life."

"Because you are a clever man, and consequently dilettante. And you were not always serious. Don't be angry. Do you remember Phillpotts, of Jesus? He was an elderly man, and he had a daughter. Wasn't her name Jessie? Then there was the 'Pearl of Price.' She married a butcher at Newmarket subsequently. Then

what of 'She of the Dainty Feet' ? She in the fulness of time got mixed up——"

"For Heaven's sake, stop!" Mallory cried. "Good God! if I were a man of right mind I should cut my throat after an hour with you! How—how do you——"

The speaker paused, absolutely at a loss to proceed. For the first time in his life he was frightened, a knowledge of nerves had suddenly been thrust upon him.

"The thing is ridiculously easy," Beggarstaff said. "You will perhaps wonder at my asking if you have recovered the Mallory diamonds yet."

"You know they are lost also? Those Scotland Yard people——"

"Have not uttered a word. You lent the family jewels to your sister to attend a Drawing-Room, and the stones disappeared under the most mysterious circumstances. Scotland Yard suggested an absolute secrecy, but you see I know all about it."

"I never felt more hopelessly at sea, never in my life——"

"And yet you are an exceptionally clever fellow, Peter."

Mallory started at the change of voice. With one sweep of his hand Beggarstaff seemed to have entirely altered his features. And yet he had merely removed his glasses, and given the long, saffron moustaches an upward curl.

"As I live," Mallory cried, "it's Paul Clibburn, of Jesus!"

"The same, at your service, Peter. You wonder to find me in this guise."

"Wonder! The feeblest way of putting it. Second Wrangler! A first-class classic! Greek and English verse prizeman. The prettiest bat for a late cut I ever saw. And perhaps the finest comedian ever seen on the banks of the Cam. And to be doing this kind of thing!"

Beggarstaff touched the bell, and gave the servant instructions that he was in to nobody. Then he carefully locked the door, and produced the cigarettes.

"I gather from your manner that you are slightly disgusted, Peter," he said.

"Well, who wouldn't be? You are masquerading in this cheap-Jack style; you, a man that might have been Lord Chancellor had you liked."

A film of regret dimmed Beggarstaff's eyes. His voice was dominated by it also.

"Unfortunately, all those things require money," said he. "And when I came down from Cambridge not only was I penniless, but I had succeeded in dissipating every penny my poor old father had. He would pay my debts, you see. When he died, two years later, my mother and two sisters were totally unprovided for. But for the thoughtless

blackguard who sits before you, they could have had every comfort.

"Mallory, to lead Cambridge by the nose and London by the ear are two cruelly different things. Honestly, I tried my hand at a dozen things: at every one of them I was a ghastly failure. I couldn't afford to wait. There comes the time when cynicism and ungodliness get you down and strangle you. I could play the liar, and humbug, and knave, perched up on ceesprings, building churches and the like. That is why I decided to become a successful humbug also."

"But you had to get a start, Paul."

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"Well, didn't that Lady Summerbright business give me a magnificent one?"

"Still, I never believed that there was anything in that thought-reading——"

"Absolute humbug," Beggarstaff interrupted. "To be perfectly candid with you, the thing was arranged between Summerbright and myself. You will remember that we were the greatest of friends at Cambridge. Summerbright placed the jewels in the drain, and then suggested that his wife should come to me, first posting me up in the local colour. After that the rest followed like a flock of sheep. They come to me with the most sacred of family secrets. I hold the honour of a

hundred families in the hollow of my hand. Peter, there is absolutely no limit to human credulity and weakness. Did I but choose, I could become the greatest black-mailer of this or any other age. But there is no need. The money comes in like a flood; and my own flesh and blood reap the benefit."

"Still, I have heard people speak very highly of you."

"Because I am cleverer than they. I never advise unless I know. I put people off; and, in the meantime, I coach up for them. Some of my adventures are worthy of a place in the *Arabian Nights*. I could tell you——"

"Crimes! Are you the latest revision of Sherlock——"

"Pshaw! I am not a detective. One stumbles upon crime sometimes; but I make it a rule to avoid that class of thing if possible. Crime is so vulgar and conventional. And I am getting to love the solution of the social mystery for its own sake. For instance, this Yellow Girl problem promises to be most fascinating."

Mallory flushed slightly.

"I may as well confess the occasion of my visit here," he said. "Indeed, seeing how much you know already, it would be folly to do otherwise. But how do you get your information?"

"You need not go any further,"

said Beggarstaff, "because I am not going to tell you. In my business—the business of life—one thing is woven into another. My few facts came to me quite accidentally, and your face shows the state of your mind. Now tell me all about the Yellow Girl and where you met her."

"But still to betray the secrets—of the—of the——"

"New Bohemian Club. There, you see. I know the name. Also, I may remark that their place of meeting is somewhere near Battersea Park. You are a member!"

Mallory commenced to speak with greater freedom.

"I am a member," he said. "There are two hundred and fifty of us altogether. Our symposiums take place every Wednesday night, eight till two."

Beggarstaff nodded and passed the cigarettes.

"So I understand," he said. "You are a very exclusive coterie."

"In a way, very exclusive. Some of the very best people come there constantly. We dance and sing, and play cards and the like, the supper being prepared beforehand, so that there are no waiters, and our own members provide the orchestra. We are free, I must confess—very free indeed. Conventionality is left in the cloakroom. Each member has an ivory ticket; and when he or she cannot attend; this

ticket may be passed on to a friend who can be trusted. So well is the secret kept that none of the society papers have got hold of it yet."

"I could go if I liked," said Beggarstaff. "Proceed."

"There is very little more to tell," said Mallory. "With some of the best and brightest society people, with a choice selection of artists, authors, and the like, I need hardly say that our functions are enjoyable in the extreme. There are no sets and cliques whatever; everybody speaks to everybody else; in fact, we are quite a happy family."

"In fact, the Yellow Girl is the only mystery you have."

"Precisely. She never misses a night. She comes at eight and goes at one, regularly."

"By goes I suppose you mean disappears," Beggarstaff suggested drily.

"I have certainly tried to trace her," Mallory admitted with a splash of red on his cheeks, "but the Yellow Girl, or Zilla, as she prefers to be called, simply melts away. The laws of our coterie preclude any personal questions, so that Zilla may be an empress for all we know. That she is wonderfully popular is certain."

"So I have heard," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "And she invariably dresses in yellow silk and black lace, with shoes to match. There is quite a flavour of Dumas

about the thing. I presume the lady is beautiful."

Mallory caught his breath, his eyes dilated.

"The cant phrase is utterly inadequate," he remarked fervently. "Zilla is fascination itself. She is the essence of the ages, the crystallisation of centuries of prettiness. Sometimes she suggests Cleopatra, then in a flash she is Clytemnestra, then she is Ellen Terry. Dark as night, a kind of dream with lovely liquid eyes floating in it. Then the fascination of her manner and the brilliant airiness of her conversation baffle description. One minute she is tender and confidential, the next she eludes you in the strangest fashion. And yet she had never seen plovers' eggs till last Wednesday."

Mallory's last remark savoured of worldly philosophy. The incident of the plovers' eggs suggested the wildest possibilities. Beggarstaff smiled. Already he had formed the still gauzy threads of a still more gossamer theory of his own.

"Really," he said, "a much more classic point than would at first appear. Do you know that those plovers' eggs form the turning-point of the tragedy, Peter?"

"Is it necessarily a tragedy?" Mallory asked.

"I fear so, unless comedy crosses it. Now, as to your intentions?"

"My fixed resolution is to make Zilla my wife."

"Quite so. I see your mind is absolutely made up on the point. And Zilla?"

"Loves me! In one of her indiscreet moments she confessed as much."

Beggarstaff made no reply for a few minutes. He seemed to dream in the smoke of his cigarette.

"Women are only women," he said presently. "But you will never marry Zilla; that is, if my theory be the correct one. You might as well go to the King, and demand the hand of a princess. The great Chinese Wall is as a box of bricks compared to the obstacles lying before you."

"Any fool can get over a wall with a ladder," Mallory said impatiently. "And I don't want you to try the sage business on me."

The seal of earnestness wrinkled Beggarstaff's forehead. His eyes were grave.

"I'm not," he said. "I am terribly in earnest! Most men would let you go to the devil in your own way, but I prefer to accompany you part of the journey. I am going to carry the ladder in fact. In other words, I am going to solve the mystery of the Yellow Girl for you, and leave the rest to Providence."

"That's exactly what I want you to do."

"Then we are agreed. You

will attend Wednesday's symposium, of course?"

"I have not missed one for the past six months."

"Good. I am going to accompany you upon this occasion. Mind, I am to have a free hand in this matter, and, not being under the glamour of the syren, I am to treat her as I please. My mission is to find out who she is and where she comes from. You will procure me a ticket?"

"With pleasure, Paul; and you shall be my best-man."

Beggarstaff smiled in a significant manner. He shuddered from the head downwards.

"In a shirt of mail, then," he muttered. "This is an adventure after my own heart, mysterious, full of danger, rococo, almost fantastic. Mind, I merely surmise. A princess of the gutter, a beggar maid in Belgravia. Which?"

Mallory rose. He was too deadly in earnest to jest.

"It is arranged for Wednesday, then?" he asked.

"I shall not fail you," Beggarstaff responded. "*A la bonne heure!*"

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST STAGE

DESPITE Beggarstaff's frankness, Mallory's belief in the occultism of his friend was as yet concrete. And Mallory was still by way of

being a rhapsodist. Even close commercial contact with the professional type of politician had not killed all the poetry that lay within him.

This he touched upon on the way to the New Bohemian. Beggarstaff laughed.

"Your mind is harping upon my startling knowledge concerning the loss of your jewels," said the latter. "You cannot understand whence came my information. What could be easier? Your sister told me. She came and asked me to recover them. And upon my word I almost fancy I am going to do so."

More Beggarstaff would not say. Even to a friend he could not wipe all the colour out of his reputation. Presently the cab stopped.

"We have got to get out here," Mallory explained. "It is one of our rules that no cab shall approach within three hundred yards of the hall. The reason is obvious. If the night is wet, why, there is an end of it."

Mallory led the way down a narrow but none the less respectable street, and turned finally into a paved yard. A flight of stone steps terminated in what appeared to be a large stable-loft. Once inside a vestibule, this prosaic suggestion vanished. The grouping of the palms and the arrangement of the drapery might have been Liberty's own handiwork, plus a daring eccentricity

and head-strongness suggestive of the best Parisian instinct.

On either side were closed doors, obviously leading to dressing rooms. The draperies, half-hanging, disclosed the dancing saloon, and beyond this, in a corridor, a glimpse of supper was afforded. Some threescore people were already dancing to excellent music provided by a party of the guests themselves.

Most of the people there were celebrities in their way—society leaders, a literary lion or two, some artists of repute.

Mallory nodded carelessly to one or another, for the majority were known to him, as indeed they were by sight to Beggarstaff also.

Gaiety rippled along the room like the song of a summer brook.

"A sight perfectly unique," Beggarstaff murmured—"nearly a hundred of the Celtic race together, and all actually enjoying themselves!"

A dazzling vision in diaphanous green, translucent as seafoam, and fresh as Aphrodite smiling to the morn, came forward.

Beggarstaff knew the lady well. She was quite the latest success in the way of duchesses.

"Sage of Tyburn," she said imperiously, "you are going to waltz with me."

It came to Beggarstaff as it does to men past thirty sometimes, that life is fitfully worth the living. He allowed the flood

tide to carry him away. It was past eleven before he suddenly returned to a knowledge of himself—and the Yellow Girl.

There she was—close beside him. Dancing had ceased for the time, and would not be resumed till after supper. Beggarstaff gasped.

He could not mistake Mallory's description. It struck him now as being singularly apt. The afflatus of love had stood Peter in good stead over that prose poem. Those eyes were the closely guarded heritage of centuries. The face was Cleopatra's. Then — Well, Beggarstaff could not be quite sure. And yet the vision could have been moulded in no crucible forged later than the sere Victorian.

Three or four men stood round her. Her lips were gay with laughter, her conversations sparkled with happy felicities. Beggarstaff had never before met any woman with so perfect a mental equipment outside America. And yet the Yellow Girl was no American. Might as well mistake Kenilworth for a Fifth Avenue pork-palace.

At a sign from Mallory, Beggarstaff came forward. Evidently Peter had been speaking of him, for Zilla held out her hand with a smile and challenge in her eyes.

"They tell me you are a marvellous man," she cried.

"Then this meeting should go

down to history," Beggarstaff suggested.

Some magnetic attraction about the pair seemed to bring others around them. And Zilla was in one of her brightest and most audacious moods. Here was a chance for the Sage to distinguish himself. Why should he not solve the enigma, explain who the Yellow Girl was, expound the *raison d'être* for the curious?

An impatient rustling of silks and laces followed this suggestion from the duchess. The cry was taken up by those standing around. Again Zilla flashed the challenge of those fathomless eyes full upon Beggarstaff.

"Come," she cried. "Come, sir, who am I?"

"That most mysterious of created things, a woman," said Beggarstaff.

"But what woman? Whence came I? Am I a sprite born of the gaslight, a miasma? Or am I but the triumph of the age of new women and machinery? Sir, you can no more tell, than—than a Cambridge professor."

"I can, and I will," Beggarstaff responded, "on one condition."

"Name it, and it is yours."

"That you take off your gloves, and show me one of your hands—the left one."

For the first time the dusky eyes fell. A creamy whiteness crept over Zilla's face.

"I have promised," she said,

"and I must perform. Stand back, all of you. This does not concern anyone but the Sage and myself. Only, if he prove my master, I will let you know."

The flashing circle widened as Zilla proceeded to remove her glove. Then, with a sudden rush of passion in her face, she gave her palm to Beggarstaff. The hand was small, but shapely, yet the fingers were hard and horny, the forefinger scored to the bone. Beggarstaff bent over it to conceal the triumph on his lips.

"I suppose this is why you never sup," he whispered.

"Ah, I do sup. But you understand it is one of my whims never to remove my gloves. Dear Sage, Dear Master, do not press me any further."

"I do not intend to press you at all. What I have discovered will never be made known to these people here. Only you challenged me, and I had, perforce, to look to my reputation. But if I happened to meet— There! I will not torture you more. Why should I spoil your evening by relating what you already know? There are conditions, though."

Zilla's lips curved between tears and scorn.

"There are always conditions where a man and a beautiful woman are concerned," she said, "and especially when the latter is at the mercy of the former. Go on."



"The gayest party in the assembly."

"You are utterly mistaken. The Ego finds no place in the problem. You are ruining the life of my friend Mallory. The intrigue must cease."

"Intrigue! How dare you! From my soul I love the man."

"And yet to marry him is out of the question. But the wise man always temporises with the psychological woman, and I give you a fortnight: Smile, you lovely fool, smile, or God knows what people will think!"

Zilla burst into the most musical of laughs. With a sweeping bow, she took up her glove, and replaced it on her hand.

"Good people," she cried. "I was mistaken. The seer knows everything. Let any one who wishes to feel humble throw down the same challenge."

The women gathered round Zilla, plying her with questions. With an eagerness he could ill conceal, Mallory drew Beggarstaff aside.

"You have fathomed the mystery?" he gasped.

"I have fathomed nothing," Beggarstaff responded. "And for the present I say nothing."

And Beggarstaff spoke the truth. He had put the nude surmise to the test, and found it clothed. But it was surmise, all the same.

When the drawing was complete, Mallory should see it, but not before. Already many of the

guests, were passing under the green silk portiere into the supper-room. Zilla flashed a backward glance at Beggarstaff. A sinuous streak of amber danced before him, a trail of indescribable perfume seemed like a track upon the air. In her moments of seductive devilry Zilla was irresistible.

"*Carpe diem!*" Beggarstaff muttered. "But I must not forget my mission, all the same."

He followed. Zilla had already taken a seat at a round table, and with a wave of her fan drew Mallory and the Sage on either side of her. The duchess was also there, with a famous comedian in her train. Diamonds flashed and glittered round the board; the flowers were a striking admixture of blood-red and white. Supper was of the plainest and the daintiest. There was only one wine—champagne.

Absolute freedom reigned. Zilla seemed to lead them all where she pleased. To Beggarstaff she was a new and delightful study. He rose at length from the table with a keen regret. Still, there was work to be done. As Zilla stood near him he placed his foot on the point of the dainty satin shoe, and twisted the same until the silken seams gaped in a tear.

"Clumsy!" Zilla cried. "See what you have done!"

She held up her little foot, which Beggarstaff examined gravely.

"It is so small," he pleaded.
"But I will see what can be done."

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, he withdrew the shoe from Zilla's foot, and placed it on the table.

"That plate is all over jelly!" Zilla protested.

Beggarstaff took no heed. From the neck of a bottle of potass water he drew the wire, and straightened it between his fingers. Then he dexterously threaded it through the seam, and twisted the ends off neatly.

"There," he said, "now you can go and dance again. Not with me—with Mallory. I am going to stay here and smoke a cigarette."

But Beggarstaff did not remain there long. He saw Zilla presently slide out of the ballroom, flashing away when nobody heeded her departure. Into an empty bonbon box Beggarstaff poured the contents of a basin of sifted sugar. With this in his hand he threaded his way to the vestibule. Then he proceeded to dust the steps leading down to the courtyard with the sparkling powder. There was a dim corner of the vestibule where one might stand unseen.

Beggarstaff had not long to wait. Presently out of the dressing-room came the figure of a woman, a lady's maid perhaps. She wore a veil, and carried a letter in her hand. Nobody could have taken

the demure figure for that of Zilla. But Beggarstaff accepted no risks. He knew Zilla to be as elusive as a sunbeam, for was not secrecy everything to her? No sooner had the maid disappeared than Beggarstaff examined the steps.

He caught up his hat and overcoat, struggling into the latter as he plunged for the night. On the sugar he had seen the print of the damaged satin slipper plainly. Once in the street he could see Zilla flitting along a hundred yards ahead. At a certain point she entered a cab, and the spy did the same with obvious intentions.

On and on they went back to civilisation, then through the uneasy, fitful slumber of the City, along towards the unknown East. Whitechapel came at length, and finally a street given over to the Chosen People.

There Zilla dismissed her cabman, and Beggarstaff did the same, at the outlay of a sovereign. Zilla appeared to be quite unconscious that she was being followed. By the fitful light of the gas Beggarstaff could see something in her hand, which he rightfully judged to be a latchkey. Before a little shop the girl paused.

At the same moment a hand, followed by an arm, shot out of the darkness and fastened with a snaky sinuousness around Beggarstaff's neck. He did not struggle. To do so would have merely

rendered the garotte an accomplished feat. Despite his danger, Beggarstaff distinctly heard Zilla's key rattle in the lock.

"Spy!" hissed a voice in Beggarstaff's ear. "I know who you are following. If I gave the call, the rest of them would come and murder you. The girl's done you no harm."

The prisoner made no reply. He had estimated the strength of his opponent to an ounce. Once free, he had no fear of the other. With the point of his elbow he caught the ruffian under the ribs, knocking the breath out of his body.

Then Beggarstaff wrenched himself away. The wiry little antagonist gave a hoarse cry. Like a flash of light, Beggarstaff's fist crushed on the hooked nose of the other. A heap of black garments wriggled worm-like on the asphalt. The sound of hastening feet could be heard coming in that direction.

Beggarstaff darted away like an arrow from a bow. It was a time when discretion was the better part of valour. A "level time" man like himself had no difficulty in deriding pursuit. Once in the Whitechapel Road, Beggarstaff slackened. He lighted a cigarette, and proceeded to make his way home leisurely on foot.

"This is going to be a remarkable adventure," he said—"a pearl of coincidences. I shall have

no difficulty in remembering the name of the street and the house—Calcraft Lane, Whitechapel, chez Israel. What a romance!"

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND STAGE

"AND you call yourself a friend!" Mallory said reproachfully. "You promise to do certain things for me, and, instead, you keep out of my way for three days. But there! I know that Zilla would elude even your vigilance."

Beggarstaff smiled as he lay back in the chair. He had had a hard day's work, and had subsequently dined intelligently. There is no armour like a good dinner.

"I only combat three of your statements," he said. "I am a friend, I am going to perform all I promised, and Zilla did not elude my vigilance. Her name and address are as well known to me as if they were published in Kelly's."

"Wonderful man! Tell me how you managed it."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, Peter. A princess told me I was a wonderful man this morning because I solved a domestic problem for her. Really, the thing looked supernatural, and so it would have been had not the husband been to me on a side-issue of the same puzzle. Once for all, Father, are you absolutely resolved to go through with this thing?"

"Nothing short of premature dissolution shall dissuade me."

"Even if the lady turns out to be a fascinating heroine with a ticket-of-leave in lieu of a pedigree?"

"If you were not Beggarstaff, what an ass you would make! I am resolved."

Beggarstaff smiled. He had expected no other reply.

"Very well," he said. "Presently we will make a journey into a far-off country. I am going to show you a kingdom within a kingdom; and I warn you that you will require all your courage. Now come with me."

So saying, Beggarstaff led the way up to his bedroom. From the wardrobe he took down two suits of clothes, bell-bottomed black trousers, double-breasted coats, and cloth caps with earflaps.

"Put yours on," he said. "Never mind about your shirt—the cleaner that is the better. And when you come to tie that queer cravat around the neck, minus a collar, you will be perfect. The collar as a civilising force is not fully appreciated."

Mallory examined himself dubiously in the glass.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I do look a Yahoo! I'd no idea of the difference. But won't what the late Laureate called 'the merits of a spotless shirt' make——"

"No difference at all. C'ean

linen, when a gentleman of Alsatia is taking his pleasure, is quite indispensable of late. Now turn your collar up and we'll start. There's no reason why we shouldn't have a cab as far as Liverpool Street."

Once the latter point was reached the cab was dismissed, and collars turned down again. Mallory felt like a man plunged into another sphere. Mars might be as this. They dived deeper into the surge of struggling humanity. The narrow streets were thronged with people. Every shop glittered with points of flame. Mallory noted a new type in the features of those who jostled him, a prominence of nose, a dilation of the nostril.

"Jews every one," said Beggarstaff. "We are in the Ghetto. The Jew is the most marvellous thing in Nature. Other animals assimilate; even a change of climate often produces a change of creed; but look at these people after the lapse of nigh on two thousand years! And here we are in Calcraft Lane at last."

"Do you mean that we have reached our destination?"

"Yes; don't show yourself too openly. Now look into that window. I was here myself last night, and something there attracted my immediate attention. Inadvertently I might mention that this establishment belongs to one Benjamin Israel."

Mallory peered in behind the dusty panes. The window was filled with tawdry finery. Cheap silk dresses, gowns of superior make and finish, filtered down to the depths, the flag of femininity flaunted from West to East. Feathers there were in any quantity, and by them a case of genuine diamond rings.

"I see nothing to attract me here," said Mallory.

"Look again. Above that blue silk with the claret stain on it. A pair of yellow satin slippers. The sole of one is seamed by a wire. They are marked tenpence. And yet I warrant that Pinet did not part with them under forty francs."

"Zilla's!" Mallory gasped. "The pair she wore last Wednesday! I'd like to buy them!"

"Go in and do so. There is only one customer in the shop. Do nothing and say nothing till she has gone, because a great surprise awaits you. And if you are asked any questions, be discreetly silent as to your friend outside. I will wait for you."

With a fast-beating heart Mallory entered. A coster girl was haggling over a heap of feathers with another girl behind the counter. The latter was clad in some homespun, without the semblance of an ornament. From the shadow Mallory watched her.

"Two shillings," said the purchaser; "not one penny more."

"My dear," came the shrill response, "you must be joking. A real ostrich feather for two bob! Do you want to ruin me! In the name of the Fathers, that feather cost two-and-three, I swear. From the bonnet of a princess, Rachel. Oh, I bought it myself from a house in Grosvenor Crescent. Rachel, half-a-crown."

The dark face was eager. The crystal essence of business shone in her eyes. A matter of life and death seemed to hang on that threepence. The purchaser sullenly assented.

"Well, I suppose I must," she said. "But you're a hard hand at a bargain, and you've got a rare wheedling tongue of your own. And you so rich, too."

"My dear, we are poor, so poor. That is all a joke of the neighbours. Stop! There is nothing more that I could show you! A ring, dear, a brooch, with a diamond——"

"Give me my change, and let me be off. You'd coax the heart out of me. Oh, you're a cunning one, you are! Ask any one down the Lane, and see."

The speaker grabbed up the coppers and flounced out of the shop. Then the assistant turned her attention to Mallory. He still stood in the shadow. The girl smiled, the coquettish syren smile, yet shrewd withal, that draws money everywhere.

Twice did the girl repeat her

question ere Mallory replied. Then he strode forward, and caught the girl's hand with painful force in his.

"Zilla," he whispered— "Zilla, in the name of Heaven, what does this mean!"

A little cry broke from Zilla's lips. The beautiful face was white with terror. She trembled like a bird fresh to the hand of the fowler.

"Why—why did you come here?" she asked hoarsely.

"I was bound to come. You might have known that I would find you out sooner or later. Now I am here, you must tell me what this means."

Very slowly Zilla was recovering herself. Her bosom ceased to palpitate; the hot, red blood crept to her face again.

Yes; she was glad this man had found her out. There could be no playing with fire any more. She, the dainty and fastidious, took a pure joy in the appalling hideousness of her attire. He must be illuminated.

"What does it matter now?" she asked recklessly.

"It matters just the same, Zilla. I shall always love you."

"Wonderful—most wonderful! Do you know what I would do now if I had a revolver?"

"God knows!"

"Shoot you, and myself afterwards. I would indeed! It would be lovely for us to die together."

A flaming light seemed to burn luridly in Zilla's eyes.

"I tell you it is impossible," she cried passionately. "I am a Jewess. Oh, if you could but faintly grasp what that means! Do you know that I can trace my descent back to the Fathers! If you saw my grandfather you would understand what a patriarch means. He would kill me before I wedded a Gentile; he would forfeit all his money first; and he loves that better than his soul." •

"But this is a free country, Zilla——"

"I am not of your country, neither am I free. Even now we stand together in deadly peril. Do you suppose that I enjoy this life? Would I stay here if I could cut away the environment? But for the fleeting glimpses of the moon I should go mad. And now the moon has gone. You must never see me again after to-night."

Mallory passed behind the counter recklessly. He caught Zilla to his side, and covered her face with kisses. The girl floated along the tide like human flotsam carried on the crest of the storm. Her soul seemed to be fused in a smile.

"Oh, you fool!" she murmured.

"You dear, dear, handsome fool!"

A cry of rage behind them rang to the greasy rafters. Mallory

faced round upon what seemed to be the archetype of the ages. A man so old was he that the striking features were a mere mass of wrinkles criss-crossed in thousands of minute lines, and yet the skin was clear as ivory. Despite his years, the patriarch stood erect; the hot blood had tinged his bald scalp; his long beard seemed to be tossed by an angry wind.

"So this is what comes of your masquerading," he cried. "This is the end of your phantasm—a low intrigue with a Christian, a man of the people——"

"You are utterly mistaken," Mallory exclaimed. "I am a gentleman of title; my position can be easily defined. I could make your grandchild my wife if——"

The old man smiled with withering scorn.

"Truly, this is generosity," he said. "You marry my son's child you! Rather would I take her by the throat and slay her! And when your forbears were tilling the soil, mine were masters of the universe. You shall never see the girl again, of that you may be certain. Go, I tell you; go before worse befalls you."

Ben Israel strode for the door, raising his voice as he went. Zilla stepped before Mallory. In passionate agitation she pointed to the street.

"Oh, be warned, be warned in time!" she cried. "If you care

for me, if you have the least feeling, leave me. You are full young to die."

Mallory hesitated. He glanced at the old man, whose dilating nostrils showed the extent of the storm pent up within.

"I will go," he said, "but I shall see you again. If you think that in a free country like this you are going to fetter——"

He said no more, for Zilla flew at him like a tiger whose young is in danger. The force of the impact carried Mallory into the street, so that he stumbled and fell in the gutter. Then the door of the shop was banged to, the key rattled in the lock, and the gas went out suddenly. Mallory stood there dazed, nor did he notice for a moment the hand of Beggarstaff on his shoulder.

CHAPTER IV

THE JOURNEY'S END

MALLORY swayed under the stress of his emotions. He was drunk with the turmoil of passion that fumed within. All these combined to promote cerebral intoxication. Naturally, wounded pride fought uppermost. Was he, Mallory of Mallory, to be flouted like this by a Hebrew old-clothes man! That the other's pride was as Aaron's rod compared with his the baronet did not realise.

"Are you absolutely mad?" Beggarstaff demanded sternly.

Mallory's arrested hand dropped to his side. Then he became conscious of a jagged flint in his fist. How it had got there was vague, its destination obvious. But Israel's window no longer stood in peril.

"If you had heard Moses declaiming!" Mallory protested.

"Peter, I heard every word. And I saw the patriarch. When you come to look at it in your calmer moments, you will realise his possession of the only point of view. And perhaps the absence of collar turned the scale. Your present appearance is not calculated to appeal to the better side of a Father in Israel."

"It can't possibly end here!" Mallory declared.

"Neither is it going to," Beggarstaff smiled significantly. "My glimpse of the old gentleman just now has merely precipitated matters. Would you be surprised to hear that Ben Israel is a patient of mine?"

"After what has happened I am surprised at nothing," said Mallory.

"Ah, in that case, you could be in no better mood for my purpose. The climax is at hand, the crux of the mystery in our grasp. You are still of the same mind?"

"I would commit crime to possess Zilla."

"Good! Then come on."

And Beggarstaff coolly rang the bell by the door on the side of the

shop. Mallory watched with admiration. A slatternly girl answered the summons. Beggarstaff placed a card in her hands.

"Take this to your master, and say I must see him at once."

The grimy one reappeared presently, and beckoned Beggarstaff to follow her.

He and Mallory passed up a grimy staircase, and from thence through baize doors into a softly illuminated drawing-room.

There was no space in Mallory for astonishment, or he might have expressed surprise. The shaded lamps, the ferns, the pictures; nothing would have been out of place in Belgravia.

"Perfect!" Beggarstaff muttered. "Haroun al Raschid was a fool to me."

At the same moment Ben Israel entered. He bowed with a benign grace. He had lost all traces of his recent leonine passion. His manner was too distinctly old-world to betray any surprise at the guise of his visitors. Then his lips grew white as he recognised Mallory. Beggarstaff hastened to interfere.

"I was bound to bring my friend," he said. "Circumstances compel it. Rest assured he will not intrude here again."

"I am not afraid," Israel said significantly. "But your presence, sir——"

"Is intentional. You have a secluded paradise here."

"A whim of my granddaughter's. Weak mortal that I am, I deny her nothing; and yet if you only knew how she repaid me!"

"We will come to that presently," said Beggarstaff. "Call your granddaughter."

Beggarstaff spoke in tones of terse command. It was evident that Israel regarded his every word as pregnant with wisdom. The superstition which bade him consult the Sage still held him to the spell.

Zilla came up, hard, brilliant, her cheeks in red rebellion. She looked at Mallory, saying nothing. But she was as a polished diamond to Beggarstaff.

"I guessed I had to thank you for this," she said.

"I am afraid you will have to thank me for a great deal more," said Beggarstaff in his most caustic manner. "My story is not long, but it is none the less interesting for that. I must say that some time ago Ben Israel came to consult me on a professional matter. During that past year from time to time he has been missing jewels from a safe. I could not divine the thief then, but I undertook to do so within a certain time, and I have done so."

"You found me out here, and after that you could do anything," Ben Israel said, with a note of admiration in his voice. "I was in despair at my loss, for the

key of the safe never left me. Tell me."

"I will tell you in a word. The thief stands there."

He indicated Zilla with a gesture. The girl smiled. With some difficulty Mallory restrained his feelings.

"It would be better to own this," Beggarstaff proceeded, "because I know where the gems have been disposed of."

Zilla stood calmly forward. Her face was stern and set. Beyond the lurid red on her cheeks she had her team of Furies well in hand.

"I am not going to deny it," she said. "Why should I? What do I owe my grandfather? My mother had money of her own, but I have never had a maravedi of it."

"Two hundred a year on your education for five years," Israel snarled. "A fortune!"

"And not one penny since. Why, I have made more than that in the shop. Did you suppose that with my intellect and beauty I was going to live and die here? And that old man is worth thousands and thousands—the richest Hebrew in the Ghetto. Half the jewels of half the families in Mayfair are stored here."

"I had tasted of better things, I had picked up the ways and manners of the great world, I have played my part in it. You gentlemen can testify to my powers. I did rob him—I robbed

him when he slept. And as to the select gathering we know of I bought my ticket from a member who came here once to pledge some cider-cups. Yes; we have seen titled people here.

"My education, my intellect, my vast and general reading, are all my own. As to dress, Worth and Jouvin, and Redfern are responsible. I robbed my grandfather to pay for it, and I would do it again."

Zilla paused for breath, and then she proceeded rapidly.

"I lived, I had to live—my soul was perishing here. But for those changes, I should have killed him and destroyed myself afterwards. Is it so strange that I should be what I am? Look at my purity of race; remember that no girl could possibly have been better educated than I; wit, beauty, and ambition were mine. I am the Phoenix risen from the garbage of this place. And I am not ashamed."

Ben Israel burst out furiously. The recollection of his losses aroused all the gall in his nature. The listeners could not follow the storm for want of a knowledge of the language. It was a tempest of words, a devastation of lightning glances, all the wild oratory that comes from majestic wrath.

Then the Hebrew paused, spent and trembling with the anticlone.

"What does he mean?" Mallory asked.

"Simply that he disowns me. He curses me," said Zilla. "A Christian cannot understand. And I could have robbed him more had I chosen. Look here."

She drew aside a panelled slide from a sideboard, and disclosed a safe.

"A fortune is there," she said, "and I have the key of that."

With a cry, Israel darted forward, trembling like a mother who sees a nursling of hers in danger. Beggarstaff took up a wax candle from a table, and lighted it, as Israel threw back the ponderous iron door. He beckoned Mallory to his side. There were scores of velvet cases in the safe. Then it was Mallory's turn to cry out. Darting his hand forward, he withdrew a green case with a crest and monogram stamped in gold thereon.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded sternly.

"And what right have you to ask?" came the ready response.

"A fair one, I take it," Beggarstaff said drily. "I may as well tell you, Israel, that my friend's proper designation is Sir Peter Mallory."

Israel looked from one to the other. A senile cunning had crept into his face. The dignity of the patriarch remained as an outraged memory. The features became so old and worn and piti-

ful that Mallory was touched.

"You old rascal!" he exclaimed. "These diamonds are my own property. They were stolen from my town house some time ago. How did you get them?"

"I think mine is the fitter state of mind to give the solution," said Beggarstaff. Our friend here deals in stolen goods of the highest class. When he came to see me I surmised something of the kind at the time. No man could have been in so abject a state of terror as he was over a mere loss. For my own sake I made inquiries here. I found Israel dubbed a millionaire and a miser. That he has confederates I had physical proofs a while ago. But until to-night I was not absolutely certain of my man. I came here to denounce yonder young lady, because after the New Bohemian adventure, I could give a pretty good guess who stole the jewels. The fact is, I surmised Israel had a monomania for jewels, and would retain the stones. I was right. I could not be certain yours were here, Mallory, but I played up to it on the off chance. Did I not tell you that this was going to prove a most remarkable adventure?"

Zilla came forward hastily.

"On my word I am innocent of this knowledge!" she said.

Obviously she spoke the truth. It was impossible to look in her

face and doubt. Israel crouched miserably in a chair, waiting for his sentence.

"Zilla," said Mallory, "I am of the same mind still."

"But the religious element," suggested Beggarstaff.

Zilla smiled through a mist of tears.

"Woman has but one religion," she said; "and there is the man who taught me. So long as I have him, the rest is nothing."

Beggarstaff turned sternly to Ben Israel.

"You hear that," he said. "You can dispose of your illegotten property as you please, but you are going to consent with a good grace. And you are going to lay your hand on the head of your son's child and pray for her happiness."

"Give me till to-morrow," Israel pleaded. "My curses I recall willingly. Am I to be outdone in clemency by a mere Christian? But as to the rest, I am an old, old man, and you do not know what you ask."

* * *

It was well into the marrow of the morning, and a cab stood at Mallory's door. Out of it stepped Zilla, sweet and chastened, a dream in black lace. Mallory congratulated himself on the fact of his sister's presence.

"Zilla," he exclaimed—"Zilla as I always see her——"

"And always will, Peter. My grandfather died in the night;

they found him dead in his bed this morning. And I have come to you."

CHAPTER V

THE BLUE-EYED SYNDICATE

"I DON'T make a point of it," the Duke said, "but as a matter of fact, I have been waiting nearly five minutes."

"That is precisely what the Prince of — said yesterday," Beggarstaff replied genially. But won't your Grace sit down?"

The Duke of Rotherfield declined the proffered invitation. He stood up against the background with the strange, weird resemblance to an elderly stork after a night of unwonted dissipation. His long face and drooping whiskers might have passed him almost perilously for a retired undertaker; but this unhappy suspicion was somewhat tempered by a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses and linen of the most immaculate kind. As for the rest, his wardrobe would have fetched no more than a few shillings in Soho. Beggarstaff took in all these details with a flashing eye.

"Really, your Grace, we should get on a great deal better if you sat down," he said. "I take it that you have come to consult me professionally?"

The Duke was not quite prepared to admit that. His manner was official, not to say extra-Parliamentary.

"But you owe me a great deal more than you seem to be aware of," Paul murmured. "That little affair of the ball programme, for instance. I have no wish to violate the sanctity of the domestic hearth, but you must admit that that little matter was awkward."

His Grace of Rotherfield fell into a reverie and one of the big saddle-bag armchairs simultaneously; then he caught Beggarstaff's eye and blushed ingenuously. The blush of a duke is a rare and precious thing.

"Upon my word, it was no fault of mine," he said eagerly. "I was dining with my old regiment, you see. It was an outrage, a positive outrage, for someone to have slipped that programme into my pocket—a programme of some smoking concert dance. . . . Naturally her Grace was a little inclined to—er——"

"Of course," Paul said with great sympathy. "I was glad to be the means of smoothing matters."

There was a florid flush on the face of the Duke; he had lost a considerable portion of his large, departmental manner. In a less illustrious personage one might say that he was fairly gaping at Beggarstaff.

"But, my good sir," he protested, "how did you possibly become aware of the facts of the case?"

Beggarstaff waived the sugges-

tion aside loftily. His desire had been to startle and impress the Duke; and he had succeeded beyond his utmost expectations.

"Pardon me," he said, "there are secrets—secrets as inviolate as the grave. I think when you found the Duchess amenable to reason—— By the way, is not that the pencil from the ball programme with which you are toying at the present moment? I presume you have been using it during your recent visit to Somerset House. I trust that you found Mr. Elijah J. Beaumont's will a sufficiently satisfactory document?"

"This is wonderful!" the Duke cried. "Absolutely amazing! I really do believe, Beggarstaff, that you are the magician people say you are. Even the Duchess——"

Beggarstaff waived the compliment aside. It was not for him to acquaint this pompous heir of the ages with the fact that her Grace of Rotherfield had consulted him over the regimental dinner and the subsequently perfumed programme. He wanted to make a deep impression, and he had every reason to be satisfied with his efforts.

"These things are easy," he said airily. "For instance, you came to consult me in the matter of the Blue-Eyed Syndicate. But I beg your pardon. You are unacquainted with the source of

mischievous under that somewhat mysterious title. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that your son, the Marquis of Balcombe, has made up his mind to marry Miss Gladys Beaumont, only child and heiress of the late Elijah J. Beaumont, of Chicago. Do you follow me? Do you admit that my premises are correct?"

"I cannot do anything else," the Duke responded.

"Very well. I see you have made up your mind to bow to the inevitable——"

"I must," his Grace admitted with a sudden burst of candour. "You see, I have theories. For some years now I have been preaching the regeneration of the British aristocracy. What we want is new blood; we have become anaemic, dyspeptic, super-hysterical. It is the duty of our class to marry healthy women, such as farmers' daughters, and the like. I have never ceased to urge this at meetings of the Physical Society. I have written a series of articles to the *Times* on the subject. On more than one occasion, I have publicly proclaimed the fact that if my son chose to marry a dairymaid I should receive the girl with open arms into the bosom of the family. To be perfectly frank with you, my dear Mr. Beggarstaff, I never contemplated Balcombe's doing anything so brutal."

"Miss Beaumont hardly comes

under this category," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "From the physical side, your son might do a great deal worse. Miss Beaumont is what one calls *petite*, but she has the most perfect health, good looks, and the most marvellous pair of blue eyes in the world. Those eyes are divine—forest pools with the grasses playing over them, liquid lakes in the moonlight."

"Don't!" the Duke said, with uplifted hand. "Don't! Balcombe writes poetry; therefore please refrain!"

"Quite so," Beggarstaff said. "Let us keep to the prosaic side. In addition to her other charms Miss Beaumont has a quarter of a million of money. This sum was left to her absolutely on her coming of age, and I believe there are other contingencies. But let us join hands round the concrete fact of a quarter of a million. I presume you saw this duly set out in Mr. Beaumont's will, which you inspected at Somerset House before you came here this morning."

"But how did you know?" the Duke murmured.

"It does not in the least matter, Beggarstaff said, with the air of one who is accustomed to perform miracles. "You called at Somerset House, and paid a shilling to inspect the will. You changed a sovereign, and had nineteen shillings in change. Ten

of these shillings you placed on the top of the ten-pound note which is my consultation fee, and which lies on the mantel-piece at the present moment. I assure you these kind of deductions are quite easy. But tell me, why do you want to prevent your son from marrying Miss Beaumont? I understand that the engagement has already been announced in the *Morning Post*——"

"Precisely. You will quite see that I have nothing in the shape of a sound argument to stand on. I have stated quite openly that my son might marry a dairymaid if he chose, instead of which he has selected a girl of beautiful physical proportions with a quarter of a million of money. But that is not the point.

"I had already chosen a wife for my son, in the person of Miss Amy Trevyllian, whose family is quite equal to my own. Moreover, the girl is an orphan, and her estates are practically in the centre of my Hallamshire property. You see, it has been one of the dreams of my life to consolidate those two estates; and I quite thought that Balcombe had fallen into my view of thinking. There was a possibility some years ago of my purchasing the Trevyllian property; but, unfortunately for us, my late father was just a little what I might call—how shall I put it——"

"Lurid," Beggarstaff said, "not

to say tempestuous. The purple patches in his career——”

“Quite so,” the Duke said hastily. “You will see that my scheme for consolidating the estates was the better one. Still, that is all a shattered dream now, unless you can see some way to prevent this marriage. There must be no scandal; nothing in the least calculated to stain the family escutcheon.”

“I understand,” Beggarstaff said drily. “I thought we should come to business at last. You may make your mind perfectly easy on one score: the Marquis of Balcombe will not marry Miss Beaumont; and there will be no scandal—at least, so far as your people are concerned. But these things cost money, my dear Duke. A sordid view, perhaps, but there it is. In the first place, I must stipulate that you receive Miss Beaumont as if she were already one of the family, and that nothing should be done to arouse suspicions. If you agree to these terms, all you have to do now is to give me a cheque for ten thousand pounds.”

The Duke started, and for a moment hesitated. What he wanted to know was whether the sum in question included the Sage’s fee.

“That is so,” Beggarstaff said gravely. “You must make up your mind to lose the ten thousand pounds—that is all you have

to provide for. I take 10 per cent of the amount, with which I am perfectly satisfied. Unless you agree to these terms I shall have to wish you a very good morning. Just one moment——”

Beggarstaff crossed the room, and opened a safe that stood in one corner. From it he produced a couple of cheques, and held them, fan-shaped, with his finger on the right hand bottom corner, so that his Grace might note the amounts. Both of them ran into six figures, and the Duke was proportionately impressed.

“These are given me to deal with exactly as I please,” Beggarstaff explained. “They relate to international events—terrible scandals which I am about to avert. You will see that your affair is a mere farthing rushlight to these fierce flames that beat about a throne. So, unless you trust me implicitly, I must decline to act for you at all.”

“Very well,” the Duke said, with a sigh. “Perhaps, after all, it is not too large a price to pay for the consolidation of the Hallamshire property. You shall have the money in the course of the day. If there is anything I can do——”

“I assure you, nothing,” Beggarstaff said firmly. “I will beg of you not to interfere, but leave everything absolutely to me. You will be leaving town in the course of a few days, I understand, and

remain at Hallam Castle till about Christmas. You will be good enough to ask Miss Beaumont to pay a long visit to the Castle. By the way, is The Chauntroy still vacant? If so, I shall be by way of finding you a tenant for it. But all that is in the air for the present. Still, if a tenant does offer himself, you will not refuse to entertain his proposals, however objectionable he may be."

"I am entirely in your hands," the Duke said resignedly. "If there is any more I have to do——"

There was nothing more, as Beggarstaff proceeded to explain. He would not detain the Duke any longer, having already wasted enough of his valuable time. He escorted his visitor to the door, and then returned, having intimated to a servant that he would see nobody else this morning. He lay back in one of the big saddle-bag armchairs, smoking a meditative cigarette. There was a faint twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"A very pretty comedy," he murmured to himself. "What a character for the stage his Grace would make, and what a triumph it all is for the Blue-Eyed Syndicate! Really, she deserves the strawberry-leaves. But I have passed my word that it shall not be; and, after all, I have to earn my fee."

* * *

CHAPTER VI

THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE SYNDICATE

IN the eyes of a thoughtless world, No. 845, Bond Street, was a bonnet-shop. As is customary with the marts of that exclusive thoroughfare, the outside of the establishment was mean, not to say dingy. A small window contained behind a sheet of plate-glass one flamboyant hat perched upon a kind of attenuated barbers'-pole.

Behind this was a brass rod and a screen of bilious-coloured silk bearing the name "Maude" in yellow lettering. It was popularly supposed by those behind the scenes that Madame Maude's establishment was really due to the genius of the Countess of Beaumanor. As everybody knows of the Beaumanors, they are the smartest of the smart, inasmuch as they always contrive to ruffle it on the crest of the wave without one penny of income from any source whatever.

An accomplishment like this is ever a passport to the most exclusive circle; and not a little of the Earl and Countess's popularity was due to the curiosity of their friends as to when the smash would come, and how proportionately disgraceful it would be when it did arrive. So far as the clubs knew, Beaumanor himself made a precarious, but none the less

substantial, income by playing Bridge. It was only recently that the Countess had opened the establishment in Bond Street on the strength of a name for good taste and a natural desire to supplement a more or less fragmentary income.

As a matter of fact, Madame Maude was doing fairly well. There was only one thing that troubled her: the enormous credit which naturally her aristocratic patrons deemed they had a right to expect.

It was comparatively early yet, and the fashionable stream had not begun to invade the West-End shops. Madame Maude herself sat in an office behind the showroom, puckering her pretty brows over a set of parchment-coloured ledgers. She was still deeply immersed in this trying ordeal when one of the tall assistants came in with an intimation to the effect that Mr. Paul Beggarstaff desired to have a few minutes conversation with Lady Beaumanoir.

"Ask him to come in," she said. "Ah, my dear Paul, this is indeed a pleasure! Positively I am at my wits' end to know what to do. What I regarded as a little gold mine looks likely to prove my undoing. I am ruined."

"Well, you were ruined before; so what does it matter?" Beggarstaff said cheerfully. "It is only a question of coming to grief

for a few thousands more or less."

"Your philosophy is admirable," the Countess laughed. "Especially when you apply it to other people. My dear Paul, the situation is absolutely maddening. The thing is a gold mine. Positively there are no hats like mine on this side of the Channel. Sell? Why, I could sell billows of millinery every day, but to get the money for it is quite another thing. If I could collect half the accounts owing to me, I could pay off my debts and be a rich woman."

"Why not pay no debts, and still be a rich woman?" Beggarstaff suggested. "I know what's the matter with you; you want more capital. If you could lay your hands upon a couple of thousand pounds, or something like that——"

"Ah! if! I can manage to hold on for another six weeks or so; but at the end of that time, I shall have to go under unless the money is forthcoming. If you could only show me a way!"

"That is precisely what I am here for," Beggarstaff said crisply. "Cast your bread on the waters, and it will return after many days. My dear Maude, we will get the money. We are about to realise our shares in the Blue-Eyed Syndicate."

"Blue-Eyed Impostor!" the Countess cried. "If I had had my own way, I should have prosecuted her——"

"And lost over eight hundred pounds. I told you at the time, and I tell you still, that the money was well laid out; and I advised you to treat the Blue-Eyed Syndicate as a serious force, and to give her as much credit as she desired. In fact, to treat her as if you did not dream for a moment that she was a lovely impostor. Now I'll bet you a sealskin jacket to a three-penny bit that every penny the Blue-Eyed Syndicate owes you will be repaid within a month."

"Two thousand pounds!" the Countess cried. "Two thousand little golden angels to waft me on their wings to prosperity and a lovely autumn season at Pau. You never boast, my dear Paul, so I will take your word for it. The girl was in here yesterday. What a beauty she is! What eyes are those! Really, she must make a brilliant marriage. If it is true that she is engaged to Balcombe, well, then, of course——"

"Oh, it's true enough," Beggarstaff interrupted, "but she is not going to marry him, all the same. In fact, she is not going to marry a penny. Nevertheless you will get your money within the time stipulated, if you follow my advice implicitly. Let the girl have whatever she wants for the next two or three days, up to the time when she goes to stay at Hallam Castle, and then you are to serve a writ on her for the whole amount

due. She will of course ignore the thing, and in the course of a few days you will be able to sign judgment. As there is nothing to levy upon, you will be able to apply for a writ of attachment."

"In the name of common sense, what does it mean?" the Countess asked. "Why don't you talk plain English?"

"My dear Maude, I am. "What I want you to understand is this: You will be able to arrest the Blue-Eyed Syndicate, which will cause her to play the game in the comedy which I have cut out for her. If you had acted in your own headstrong fashion, you would have prosecuted the Syndicate and lost every penny of your money. Add to which, you never would have obtained a conviction."

"I don't think I would," the Countess said thoughtfully. "We could never have proved that she knew her father to be an absolute pauper. There is not a soul in Mayfair to-day who does not regard Gladys Beaumont as anything but a great heiress. It was a noble scheme on her father's part to die with a will leaving his daughter a quarter of a million in cash. I don't even believe the late lamented Beaumont came from Chicago at all."

"He didn't," Beggarstaff laughed. "He was a pure and simple adventurer who left the British Army some years ago

under shady circumstances, and picked up a precarious living plucking pigeons on the Continent. Just before he died he had a streak of luck which enabled him to come home, and carry it off with a fairly high hand at the *Langham Hotel*, where he posed as a wealthy American from Chicago. One or two of the needier Tyburnians took up Miss Beaumont, all the more warmly after her father died and his will was mentioned in the papers.

"There is not the faintest doubt in my mind that Gladys Beaumont knows all about the swindle, but the difficult thing is to prove it. You couldn't prove that she came to you and obtained a large amount of stuff on credit, knowing herself to be a pauper all the time. You were quite wise when you took my advice, and more or less trained her for the part she was to play in bringing about a brilliant marriage. Hence the Blue-Eyed Syndicate, and all that it has led up to. But for a piece of good fortune, Gladys Beaumont would have become Duchess of Rotherfield to a dead certainty. Not that she cares a fig about Balcombe——"

"She doesn't care a fig about anybody," the Countess said. "She is very lovely and very sweet, and all that kind of thing, but she hasn't one particle of heart. Very few of those placid, blue-eyed girls have. The only man

she is capable of caring for is one of the big, strong Berserk type, that bully women—I mean a combination of Colonel Crawley and Jonas Chuzzlewit—the kind of fellow who gets drunk, and brutally ill-treats his wife when she expostulates. Gladys Beaumont would follow a man like that to the end of the world."

Beggarstaff sat down on an Empire settee, and laughed with the air of a man who is not disposed to over-criticise himself.

"Petruchio's Kate," he murmured, "I think I see her in the part, only it will be Kate in the third act, in her most chastened mood. Mind you, it is playing it rather low down upon the girl; but she is a consummate little actress and adventuress, and deserves all she gets. All you have to do now is to wait till she goes to Hallam Castle, and then take out your writ. I shall be up there, too; and you can let me know exactly how things stand from time to time. Anyway, there is one thing we may be sure of: if you act on instructions you are certain to get your money."

"Then give me a cheque for it now, and deduct the discount" said Lady Beaumanor promptly. "It will make no difference to you, and prove a kind of a mild salvation in my case."

Beggarstaff courteously declined to do anything of the kind. His knowledge of the smart set

was extensive and peculiar, and besides, he was one of the best Bridge-players in London. He strolled out of the little shop presently, and made his way in the direction of the nearest telegraph office. Here he despatched a message, and then sauntered off westward with a view to lunching at his club.

It was late in the afternoon before a waiter came into the smoking-room with an intimation to the effect that a gentleman was asking for Mr. Beggarstaff.

The visitor came in a moment later—tall, broad-shouldered, and jaunty, exceedingly well dressed, but yet withal suggesting a flavour of benzoline and boot-polish.

The new-comer might have passed for a gentleman except with those over-fastidious in their choice of the article; but, big and strong as he was, there was a pungent flavour of the swash-buckler about him. His voice was a little too loud, his appearance of being at ease too pronounced. His short-cut hair seemed to accentuate the pertinacious type of his face, his features were broad, the nostrils widely slit and upturned. One knew by instinct that he was well acquainted with bars and saloons, and that it was his habit to call the waitresses by their Christian names. He turned with insolence to the waiter standing by his elbow, he stared haughtily around the smok-

ing-room, but, curiously enough, he had some difficulty in meeting Beggarstaff's penetrating eyes.

"Brandy-and-soda," he said—"a large one. I got your telegram, Beggarstaff. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Beggarstaff said curtly. "You can be a little less familiar to begin with. I presume that you are in your usual state of impecuniosity. Like Mr. Micawber, you are still waiting for something to turn up."

The big man's sensual lips shook with passion.

"Of course I am," he said. "I never did have a fair chance yet. Give me a thousand pounds, and see what I'll do with it. Give me a fair opening, and in three years I shall be ruffing it in one of those blooming Park Lane palaces."

"I quite believe you," Beggarstaff said. "You have been exceedingly useful to me on one or two occasions, and I am not indisposed to be grateful. A man like you, who is utterly unscrupulous, and knows so much of the world, ought to get on when the crystal opportunity comes along. After all said and done, you are no bigger blackguard than some capitalists I can name. Now, what do you say to having the handling of something in the nature of ten thousand pounds?"

The narrow, cunning eyes of the listener widened, and he smiled. It was not a pretty smile, and, on

the whole, Beggarstaff preferred the man's natural expression.

"You are rotting me!" he said hoarsely.

"I was never more in earnest in my life," Beggarstaff replied, "but there are certain conditions which will have to be implicitly obeyed. With the hold I have over you I am not in the least afraid that you will play me false. If you agree to what I propose, then to-morrow a cheque for nine thousand pounds passes into your hands. You are not likely to make much actual cash out of the deal—at least, not for the present, but ultimately you may do as you please, and no awkward questions asked. Now, how would you like to be a country gentleman, living in a fine place of your own, and passing for a man of independent means?"

"I can do that easily enough," Marchmount said. "Don't forget that my people used to be in a good position in Yorkshire. I don't suppose I shall be good enough for some of the nobles, but I can pass easily enough with the rank and file. Now, what is your game?"

By way of reply, Beggarstaff took half a sheet of note-paper from his pocket, upon which, in his own neat handwriting he had written out a carefully toned paragraph. This he proceeded to read aloud to his puzzled visitor—

"We understand that, after the

lapse of some years, his Grace the Duke of Rotherfield's beautiful old house 'The Chauntrey' has been let to a South African magnate, who intends to take up his permanent residence there. The Chauntrey, which used to be the dower-house of the family of the Rohens, is situated just outside the lodge-gates at Hallam Castle, and is probably one of the finest specimens of Tudor architecture in the North of England.

"The hand of the spoiler has never been laid upon a single brick or beam, so that the new tenant will have the satisfaction of knowing that he is enjoying the full flavour of pure mediaevalism. It is an open secret that the house has passed into the possession of Mr. Marchmount Browne, the fortunate speculator who has so recently achieved such success prospecting in Rhodesia.

"The good sportsmen in the West Riding of Yorkshire will also appreciate the fact that Mr. Marchmount Browne is a gentleman by birth, and a connoisseur of the beautiful by choice and inclination. It is therefore a matter of comparative certainty that the fine old house will not suffer by comparison with other establishments in the neighbourhood whose artistic contents are a household word."

Marchmount stared open-mouthed at Beggarstaff. It is evident that he suspected the

latter of one of his exquisite practical jokes.

"What on earth has all this got to do with me?" he growled. "And who the deuce is Marchmount Browne, anyway?"

"I was just coming to that," Beggarstaff said smoothly. "In this little game, you are one of my puppets, and not the least important one either. Still, so long as you are well paid for your trouble, you will not mind. To break the thing to you gently, my good fellow, *you* are going to be Mr. Marchmount Browne."

A broad grin gradually spread over the engaging features of the listener. It seemed to Beggarstaff that he would play the part of the blatant South African millionaire with great success. Already Marchmount had visions of himself, installed comfortably in that fine old house, and incidentally plundering the local tradesmen on the strength of his fictitious wealth.

"I'm on," he whispered hoarsely. "You can count on me. But when is the play to commence? Lord, what a game it is! Here am I, almost reduced to my uppers, with no more than half-a-canary in my pocket, and me swelling in a day or two in one of the stately homes of England! Let's have another drink on the strength of it."

"No," Beggarstaff said politely, but firmly. "No doubt you will

find it exceedingly irksome, but this has got to be one of the sober jobs. You had better go now, and come round to my rooms to-night, and I will give you my final instructions; and meanwhile you are not to look upon the wine that is red—or any other colour, for the matter of that. That is all I have to say for the moment."

CHAPTER VII

THE GOSPEL OF DULNESS

THERE were candles on the table—candles few and far between in great silver branches, pin-points of flame that served to accentuate the cases of darkness between. The Gospel of Dulness had been reduced to a fine art at Hallam Castle. According to the authority of the halfpenny papers, the Duke of Rotherfield was entertaining a select party at his place in Yorkshire. The select party in question was dining in the great hall, and consisted of the Duke and Duchess, with Lord Balcombe; his fiancée, Miss Gladys Beaumont, and Mr. Paul Beggarstaff.

The latter could have wished just then for something to animate the feast—something of the flowing-bowl order. It occurred to him as he sat there, toying with an insufficient portion of grouse, served on old silver, that a little

diversion in the way of fireworks might have struck the right note. In that lofty hall, with its dimly outlined painted ceilings, a flight of rockets would have been perhaps appropriate.

At the head of the great mahogany table the Duke sat like the presiding genius of maddening respectability. Away somewhere down the dim perspective, Beggarstaff could see the outline of hard grey hair and aquiline nose, which was all he could make of the Duchess. On his left-hand sat Miss Beaumont; and, opposite, a dazzling expanse of shirt-front, which was faintly topped by the classic head of the Marquis of Balcombe. The conversation languished; one topic after another dropped and died like sensitive plants for want of water. It seemed to Beggarstaff that he was earning his fee. He was approaching the end of a fortnight's visit, and the end of the week would see him back in town again.

It was good to turn to the fair being on Paul's left hand. One of the islands of light fell upon her face, and brought out all the serene and healthy beauty of it. Gladys Beaumont belonged to the type of woman from whom society demands no brilliant originality. She was like a beautiful picture by Romney—made to be looked at, and to gladden the heart of the connoisseur. Those marvellous

blue eyes were uplifted to Beggarstaff for a moment, and he thrilled. He could understand men committing crime for a pair of eyes like those. He thought of Ninon de l'Enclos, of the Pompadour and other historic beauties who had punctuated the history of empire with their glances. And yet at the same time there was a demure suggestion in those azure orbs that belied their innocent serenity.

"Take it away," the Duke said solemnly. "I make no point of it. It is not for me to suggest that mortals never make mistakes, but the sauce is burnt."

A solemn butler together with a few satellites in gorgeous livery held a consultation over the offending sauceboat. They looked less like servants than medical specialists called in consultation over some grave case. Beggarstaff appeared to be listening with bated breath. Altogether it was an awesome moment.

"This happened once before," the Duchess remarked from the depths of the circumambient gloom. "I thought perhaps I was mistaken. I put it down to the condition of my liver."

The chatelaine of Hallam Castle spoke as if the organ in question belonged to a class of its own. Beggarstaff was gravely sympathetic.

"The liver of great age, the

liver of our forefathers—I mean your forefathers,” he said, his mind playing vicariously around a certain well-known advertisement. “But we have all our trials.”

“Some of us have our trials made for us,” the Duchess said significantly. “What I have gone through the last fortnight would have tried more sensitive nerves than mine. Indeed it was with positive gratitude for me to learn that that man could not dine with us this evening. What the Duke could possibly see——”

“My dear, it is a matter of business,” the Duke expostulated. “I am quite willing to admit that Mr. Marchmount Browne does not belong to our set. Indeed I may go further, and say that in ordinary circumstances nothing would have induced me to offer him the hospitality of my house; but it never occurred to me, when I agreed to let him The Chauntrey, that he would have the audacity to make an offer for the Trevyllian estates. You can imagine my astonishment when one of Amy Trevyllian’s trustees wrote me saying that Mr. Browne had offered them two hundred thousand pounds for the property. As honourable men, bound to do their best for their ward, they could not possibly refuse. So far as I am concerned, I could not possibly have improved the offer. For this reason only, I have culti-

vated Mr. Marchmount Browne’s acquaintance. It seemed to me that there was a chance of inducing him to change his mind. I am sanguine that I almost convinced Mr. Browne when he dined here on Monday.”

A prolonged sigh came from the vicinity of the Duchess.

The servants were bringing in the dessert now; the candles gleamed fitfully on the polished mahogany. Then there was a rustle of skirts, and the ghostly figure of the Duchess vanished into the *ewigkeit*. Glorious blue eyes flashed just for an instant into Beggarstaff’s face.

“You will come and play me a game of billiards presently?” Gladys Beaumont whispered. “We shall be quite alone, as Lord Balcombe is writing a sonnet. I understand he has reached the third line, and cannot succeed in getting a good rhyme to ‘devotion.’”

Beggarstaff crossed the great corridor presently, picking his way carefully through the gloom.

The place seemed to be lighted on the principle of one candle to a cubic acre of space.

Paul could catch sight of figures in armour and great frescoes on the walls. The majesty and gloom of the house were Titanic. It was easily possible to imagine oneself going melancholy mad in the midst of this gloomy splendour.

It was not much better in the

billiard-room, for the table was lighted with oil lamps, and the balls cast long shadows over the mouldy cloth. The condition of the table mattered nothing. The woodwork was most elaborately carved.

"It reminds me of Gilbert's song in the 'Mikado,'" Miss Beaumont said with a flashing smile. "I love this table. You never know what the balls are going to do next. Mr. Beggarstaff, is it really true that Mr. Marchmount Browne wants to buy Amy Trevyllian's property?"

"I dare say," Beggarstaff said carelessly. "He seems to be a very rich man."

"And what a man!" Gladys said. "Do you know, I don't think I have ever admired anybody more in my life. I should hate to be tied up to the ordinary type of husband. I should want to poison him in a week. But a man like Mr. Browne, who would be master of his own house—ah, that is quite a different affair! I could imagine him beating his wife if she tried on any of her nonsense."

"You would prefer him to Lord Balcombe?"

"Balcombe! An insipid copy of Lord Byron without his good looks and his redeeming vices. I don't think I could possibly go through with it, and yet I must do something. Positively Lady Beaumanor refuses to give me any

more credit. She has been sending me most dreadful papers lately through her solicitors. Indeed, I rather gather that I am going to be locked up unless I make arrangements to pay all that money forthwith. Can't you do anything for me?"

"I am afraid not," Beggarstaff said. "It is no light matter to interfere with an angry woman where money is concerned. But still there is no reason why you should not hurry on your marriage with Balcombe; or you might confide in him, and he would advance you the necessary amount——"

"Indeed he wouldn't. These people are patrician to their finger-tips; and they are just as greedy about money as any shopkeeper. Besides, you see, my poor father——"

The girl paused and hesitated. Beggarstaff smiled.

"Oh, we know all about that," he said. "Your father was an exceedingly clever man; and, between ourselves, he left behind a daughter who was worthy of him in every way. My dear girl, you need not frown at me like that. I know all about it, and you know that I do. That will of your father's has been a valuable asset to you. Where would you have been without it?"

Gladys Beaumont laughed unaffectedly. It was no use keeping up the mask with this man.

He knew perfectly well how the whole thing had been arranged. He read her like an open book. He might have said more, only one of the gorgeously arrayed footmen came in at the same moment with a telegram. Beggarstaff tore it open, and read it with affected carelessness. The message contained but two words: "Eleven o'clock!" Paul pitched the flimsy into the fireplace; a moment later a big bell tolled out from the flag-tower.

"Ten o'clock!" Gladys Beaumont said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Family prayers filtered through the Duke, then bed, and breakfast at half-past seven. Think of all this mapped out for me for the next fifty years or so! My dear Paul Beggarstaff, there would be a blazing scandal at Hallam Castle long before that. I wonder, I really wonder, what Mr. Marchmont Browne is doing at this moment? Also, I wonder what the good people here would say if they knew how often I have met that really magnificent specimen of a man the last fortnight?"

* * *

Beggarstaff carefully opened the door of his bedroom, and glanced into the darkened corridor. He held one of the branches of candles in his hand. From his room came a pungent blast of tobacco-smoke. The Indian weed was strictly tabooed in Hallam

Castle, but then Beggarstaff always made it a point of overriding restrictions of this kind. He had not yet undressed. The big clock was striking eleven as he made his way down to the dining room. Everybody had retired long before. The place was silent as the tomb and as dreary as a mausoleum.

Beggarstaff had not long to wait. His quick ear caught a footfall on the stairs, and he crept close to the door. A second later, and he had a cloaked figure in his grasp. The cloaked figure made no sign, but Beggarstaff could feel that it was trembling violently. He led his companion to the light, and in his gentlest possible manner removed the hood from her head.

"It is my privilege as a Seer to read the thoughts of others," he said. "Will you tell me where you are going, Miss Beaumont, or shall I tell you? Not that I am going to interfere. It is possible to make a dubious living out of the follies of fools, and yet be a good sportsman at the same time. Shall I ask him to come in?"

Gladys Beaumont stood there, deadly white, for a moment. Then the hot blood flamed into her face; those deep liquid lakes of blue were turned appealingly to Beggarstaff.

"He loves me," she whispered. "Oh, I dare say you would say he is a bad man, and that he has

lived his life, but he is the only one for me. He will bully me and perhaps ill treat me when the mood is on him, but I care for him for his very strength and power. Besides, I am penniless. Why should I disguise from you the trick invented by my father and myself to blind fools and gain me friends for the sake of my so-called money ? ”

“ Balcombe,” Beggarstaff said tentatively, “ He also is rich.”

“ Oh, I know, I know. But then, you see, he is not a man. How long could I stand this life without flying in the face of public opinion ? No, no, Mr. Beggarstaff.”

By way of reply, Beggarstaff crossed the room and opened one of the long windows leading to the lawn. He expressed no surprise to find Marchmount standing there in an attitude of expectation. As if it had been all part of a stage play, he led Gladys forward, and placed her hand in that of Marchmount.

“ This is affecting,” he said. “ The union of two fresh young hearts always moves me to tears. It is no time or place, Mr. Marchmount, to remind you that you are betraying my instructions. Still, in my time I have not been insensible to the seduction of blue eyes—or brown eyes, for the matter of that. Bless you, my children, Miss Beaumont cannot be suspected of anything but the

purest intentions, seeing that she is a great heiress in her own right ; and the same remark applies to the happy bridegroom. A man who could afford to take the Chauntrey and furnish it regardless of expense, must be in an exceedingly happy financial condition. Therefore, once more, bless you, my children.”

“ How did you know ? ” Marchmount grinned uneasily.

“ My happy Benedick, I know everything,” Beggarstaff said. “ From the first moment you two met, I saw the inevitable, plain as the writing on the wall. Therefore, as a friend of Miss Beaumont’s, I determined to prepare for an emergency. You need not take the trouble to worry as to how you are going to get to York, because you will find my Mercedes car waiting for you at the lodge-gates. My man has all his instructions. Further than this, I ask your acceptance of this little strip of parchment. It is from the Archbishop of York to his well-beloved James Marchmount and Gladys Beaumont. In prosaic words it is a special marriage licence. I have calculated that you can be at St. Peter’s at York by eight-thirty o’clock in the morning, where you will find the vicar awaiting you. No. I need no thanks. It is always part of my system to do these things thoroughly.”

Beggarstaff turned and closed

the window behind him. Then he went quietly up the stairs, and thence to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

THEIR HOUSEHOLD GODS

THE blinds were all down at Hallam Castle as the newly-married pair drove along in the direction of The Chauntrey. It had been gravely announced in the *Times*, and other frivolous papers of that kind, that the Duke and Duchess of Rotherfield, together with the Marquis of Balcombe, had gone abroad for the winter. At the same time the pronouncement had gone round to the effect that the marriage arranged between Lord Balcombe and Miss Gladys Beaumont would not take place. On the whole, society had every reason to be grateful.

If the genius who had inspired this little comedy had been present at that moment, he would have been fain to admit that Marchmount was somewhat improved by matrimony. His charming wife sat opposite to him, dressed from head to foot in white. There was no shadow of trouble in her lovely blue eyes. She looked like some innocent child on a pleasure-trip.

A servant or two stood in the hall as Gladys entered. She flitted like a butterfly from place to place. She was loud in her admiration of the fine old artistic

furniture. Marchmount grinned as he listened. He took up a copy of the *World*, evidently laid down there by some thoughtful domestic, for on a turned-back page he could see an elaborate, not to say spicy, account of his own elopement with the heiress of Mr. Elijah B. Beaumont, late of Chicago.

The dinner-hour was drawing near as Gladys came tripping down the stairs into the drawing-room. She was all in white still; there were flowers in her hair; her gleaming shoulders were like some delicately carved ivory. Marchmount, stood, big and strong and overbearing, with his back to the fireplace. His eyes lighted up as Gladys entered. He caught her to him with a passionate force, and kissed her lips. It was evident enough that this man had given the whole of his passionate heart to the slim creature by his side.

"Come," he cried. "This is better than Hallam Castle, anyway. I wonder what that ass Balcombe would say if he could see us now? If he ever cared for you——"

"He didn't," Gladys laughed. "He was too egregious to care for anybody but himself. Behind that superior manner of his were a little mind and a little nature. It struck him as not a bad thing to have a couple of hundred thousand pounds in the

family. Not being aware for a moment that I was an absolute pauper——”

Gladys delivered the blow with a sidelong smile, and an upward glance of those lovely blue eyes, yet at the same time her face was very pale, her lips had lost their colour. Marchmount glared, his eyes grew bloodshot, the big red veins stood out like whipcords on his forehead. He laid a hand upon Gladys' arm. She winced with the pressure, but her pleading eyes never left the coarse red face.

“It is true,” she whispered. “I have no money. I never had any. When my father died he had spent the last ten-pound note. It was part of the game for him to pass as a rich American. It was part of the game for him to leave me a large fortune. The thing was talked about. I was invited everywhere. Oh, how good they all were to the poor little orphan! How they fought to take care of me and my money! I could have married a score of rich men. You know I could have become a duchess had I liked . . . Jim! . . . For God's sake don't look at me like that! You are not going to—murder me?”

The grip had been relaxed from Gladys' arm; the imprint of the cruel fingers left a deep stain like blood on virgin snow. Marchmount was seeing red now, his

wife's face floated before him in a crimson haze, he did not know that his hand was clenched upon the milky throat. A faint cry! came from somewhere, but he did not identify it with his wife's despairing agony. Then the red mist cleared away, and Marchmount staggered back, trembling violently.

“I nearly did it,” he said hoarsely. “You should have broken it to me more gently. Your eyes came out of the mist, and I couldn't. . . . Oh, you magnificent little liar, you consummate actress! If I had only known!”

Gladys took fresh heart of grace. There was no withering scorn in the speaker's voice. It rang with grudging, but none the less passionate admiration. Gladys crept to the side of her husband, she touched him timidly.

“I love you!” she said. “Oh, Jim, if you only knew how much I love you! You are the only man in the world for me. I want some one to look up to, to admire, to be desperately afraid of. But what does this money matter so long as you have so much of your own?”

“You witch, you beautiful white devil!” Marchmount said. There was no anger in his voice now, his red eyes were smiling. “Now answer me a question. Suppose I had no money; suppose

I tell you at the present moment that I am as poor as you are ? ”

“ I think I should be glad,” Gladys whispered. “ Anyway, I would have married you just the same. Before Heaven, I would have done so, Jim.”

Marchmount fairly lifted his wife from her feet and kissed her passionately. She thrilled with gratitude and admiration. For a good man she would have cared nothing ; for this adventurous blackguard she would have imperilled her slim, anæmic soul. She looked up swiftly as Marchmount burst into a stentorian laugh.

“ Sold all round ! ” he cried. “ You have married a pauper after all, my girl. We have both been the puppets of that cunning devil Beggarstaff. Don’t you see that he was employed by the Duke to prevent you from marrying Balcombe ? His idea was to throw us together, so that I might fall in love with you, or your money, or both. On the other hand, he reckoned you up pretty well. He knew that I should act as a fine foil to Balcombe. Egad ! he must have known it, or he would never have smoothed the way for our marriage, and provided the special certificate in the way he did. There is another thing. Did you not tell me just now that Madame Maude, otherwise Lady Beaumanor, was pressing you for the payment of a

large account ? Don’t you know that Beggarstaff is practically in partnership with my lady ? ”

“ I had forgotten that,” Gladys laughed. “ You see, Lady Beaumanor more or less dressed me on the strength of my money. When she found out the truth, she was furious, and threatened to prosecute me. I see now why Paul Beggarstaff used to call me the Blue-Eyed Syndicate. It was he who induced Lady Beaumanor to go on giving me credit until I should make a rich marriage. I shrewdly suspect, also, that it was he who advised her ladyship to put pressure on me, and so force on my marriage with the South African millionaire—Mr. Marchmount Browne. But tell me, Jim, how could you possibly be a pauper with all these lovely things about you ? ”

Marchmount proceeded to explain. As he outlined the plot things became more and more clear to him.

“ I had nine thousand pounds in cash,” he explained. “ I was to furnish this place in style, and you can see that I have done so. Look round. All my carpets and pictures, the silver and the china, and all the rest of it. The artistic game is to half furnish a room and then call it restraint. Take the dining-room as an example. Magnificent Murillo over the fireplace ; looks as if it were worth five thousand pounds. Wardour

Street, my girl,—Brummagem ! There isn't a blessed article in the house that isn't faked, from the big sideboard in the dining-room right down to these shoddy prayer-rugs all over the floor. Do you suppose I was going to lose a chance like that ? Why, I haven't spent a penny more than a thousand pounds here, and the rest I have got snug in the bank. What did it all matter ? People regard me as a great capitalist, and therefore all this flashy furniture passes for genuine. You shall have your debts paid, old girl, and we will just disappear from here, leaving a lot of rapacious tradesmen to mourn our loss. With my brains and capital, and those lovely blue eyes and innocent manner of yours, it is odd if we don't get to the top of the tree. This is the first real chance I have ever had, and I am not going to let go of it without a fight. Now, come in to dinner, and let's drink to the health of Paul Beggarstaff, the best friend we ever had."

They went in together gaily, much as a boy and girl might do. Marchmount beamed with pleasure ; his great coarse face was full of the joy of combat. Gladys sat there demure and smiling, with a light flashing on her glorious eyes. A strangely assorted couple, and likely to be dangerous to the peace of mind of those with

whom the adventurers might come in contact. Marchmount filled a brimming tumbler of champagne, and raised it to the health of Paul Beggarstaff.

CHAPTER IX

THE INCONSEQUENT PRINCESS

THE little man in the saddlebag armchair remarked somewhat pompously that he had come for advice. He was under the impression that Beggarstaff dealt largely in this commodity.

"One quality only," Beggarstaff quoted—"the best. You will find that my establishment deals only with the superior article. But you are quite wrong, sir, in your judgment on your daughter. She is merely inconsequent, and, I am sure, altogether charming. Picturesque figures are so sadly rare that any one of these adding to the gaiety of nations is always sure of a certain welcome. Your daughter——"

"Bless my soul," said the little man, "this is extraordinary ! I am bound to admit that it is in connexion with my child that I am here to-day. If you knew who I am——"

Beggarstaff waived the suggestion aside. There was a pleasant smile on his face as he regarded the shabby little man with the red moustache seated opposite.

"I know you quite well, sir,"

he said. "The last time I had the pleasure of meeting you, you were in, so to speak, a larger way of business than you appear to be to-day. If your Majesty will pardon me, I will venture to point out——"

"Need we mention names?" the visitor asked.

"I think so," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "You see, it makes things so much easier. I may also say that my knowledge on the subject of European Courts and their little intrigues is extensive and peculiar. Now, say, for example, you are Valentine II, King of Asturia, and, like many other monarchs just now, you are having trouble with your family. There is the Princess Serena, for instance. I am not quite sure whether ladies of the Princess Serena type were invented by Anthony Hope, or whether they are the cause of his popularity. But any way the fact remains that the Princess in question is what I may be allowed to call a bit of a handful. Is not this so?"

"Oh, Lord, yes," he of Asturia said, with some show of irritation. "You appear to be a wonderful man, Mr. Beggarstaff, and quite as clever as they told me you are. I have consulted my ministers, and they cannot help me at all. As a kind of last resource, I came here in my private capacity to see if you would assist me. It will

probably be no secret to you that the Princess Serena is in England. I tell you that King Lear was a proud progenitor compared to me."

"Your Majesty has my sympathy," Beggarstaff murmured, "especially as you have other daughters. You will permit me to assume that there is nothing really wrong about any of them?"

The ruler of Asturia hastened to assure Beggarstaff that he was perfectly correct in that respect. What the princesses principally suffered from was a combination of extraordinarily high spirits, allied with a perfect passion for adventure.

"Goneril and Regan," he explained—"I mean my daughters Mary and Victoria—are but colourless creatures alongside their sister Serena. She recognises no authority. She does just as she likes, and nothing is too romantic for her taste. For instance, she disappeared the other day, and we found out later that, under an assumed name, she was attempting to lead a revolutionary party in Russia.

"At the present minute she is in England with a view to establishing a kind of sisterhood for the relief of indigent aliens. For the moment she is under the influence of an English priest whom she met in Geneva—a shining light among Christian Socialists I believe he is. The type is a new

one to me; indeed, it was not thought of in my Oxford days."

"I know the brand," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "Clean-shaven, inclined to be athletic, generally has a couple of front teeth stopped with gold, and within recent memory has undergone an operation for appendicitis."

"Bless me," the King cried, "You must actually know the man! You have hit off his description to a nicety."

"Quite an easy matter," Beggarstaff said modestly. "No curate of the higher flight could be really in the van of fashion without a little experience in the way of appendicitis. But tell me, sir, what there is in this recent freak of the Princess's to give you such cause for alarm?"

"I was coming to that," the King explained. "As you are probably aware, my daughter is engaged to be married to Prince Leopold of Asturia Minor. Strange as it may seem, the girl is very much in love with Leopold, who is a strong man, well able to keep her in order—once they are married."

"As a matter of fact, the alliance is highly desirable for political reasons. To go further, I must explain to you that the marriage ceremony is actually fixed to take place next week. You can appreciate the feelings of a father who has a daughter

like this to deal with. Prince Leopold is at present in Paris on business connected with her trousseau. I dare not tell him the truth; and that is why I am here this morning to place myself entirely in your hands.

"Violence I could not countenance for a moment, but you must devise some scheme for driving the Princess out of England. She must have a good fright, something that will appeal to her imagination and bring her to her senses, if only for a short time. Once she is married to Prince Leopold, I think I can confidently look forward to a little peace. Now, Mr. Beggarstaff, can you see your way to accomplish this most desirable consummation?"

Beggarstaff knitted his brows as if in deep thought. Presently a smile was allowed to play over his ingenuous countenance.

"I fancy I *do* see my way," he said. "If I remember rightly, the Princess holds rather extraordinary views on the subject of what Mr. Wemmick called 'portable property.' Just a little laxity as to the interpretation of *meum* and *tuum*, if I may put it. By the way, was not the Princess in England, staying with the Countess of Wimbledon, some two years ago?"

The King nodded, and Beggarstaff's smile deepened.

"I thought so," he said. "There was a little trouble at that

time over some valuable family diamonds which were mistaken by the Princess as her own. We will put it down to what Mr. Galton calls 'the theory of heredity.' A long line of predatory ancestors is certain to leave its mark on a decadent generation like our own. I do not wish to wound you, sir, but have there not been occasions when you were requested to pay jewellers' bills for articles which the Princess had taken with her in a fit of absent-mindedness? A fashionable physician has invented a name for this kind of thing. Your Majesty has probably heard the word—'kleptomania?' "

"That's it," the King cried eagerly. "You have hit it off exactly. But, tell me, does this little weakness of my daughter's character give you an inspiration?"

"It is the key of the whole comedy," Beggarstaff said. "Your daughter wants a wholesome fright; she wants to be convinced that her personal liberty is in peril; and in that condition of mind you can do what you like with her. I can promise your Majesty that this is safely accomplished; but the experiment will be a costly one. I don't think that I can see my way to settle the matter on a thoroughly satisfactory basis for less than a thousand guineas."

His Majesty of Asturia rose to

the occasion like the fine sportsman that he was. Perhaps he had come prepared for something of the kind, for he laid a bundle of banknotes on the table.

"I think you will find all you want there," he said. "In the first place, tell me what I have to do."

"Nothing whatever," Beggarstaff proceeded to explain. "That is, nothing beyond seeing my instructions carried out implicitly. You had better see the Princess. By the bye, I suppose she is not aware that you have followed her to England? No? So much the better. Go to her at once, and treat this last escapade as lightly as you can. Ignore the clean-shaven victim of appendicitis altogether. You had better hint that this is an excellent opportunity for the purchase of something valuable in the way of a wedding present. The present had better take the form of diamonds. Make an appointment for three o'clock this afternoon to meet your daughter at the establishment of Rossiter and Co., in Bond Street. By the way, the Princess has an attendant, of course. I presume it would be possible to enlist her on our side by the judicious outlay——"

"Not at all necessary," the King said, with some show of humour. "Countess Linda is only too anxious to get back home, seeing that she is engaged to a rich man of romantic tendencies

and some desire in the direction of frequent variety. You may rely upon the countess."

"Then that is as good as settled," Beggarstaff cried gaily. "I don't think I need trouble your Majesty any further. You will make the appointment at Rossiter's for three o'clock, but at the same time there is not the slightest necessity for you to keep it. You can proceed to pack the Royal gripsack, and return to Asturia without delay. One thing I can promise you: the Princess Serena will be on her way home by midnight, as fast as a special train and special steamer can carry her."

The King rose, and extended a moist, grateful palm to Beggarstaff. The regal tones shook with honest emotion. "You are a wonderful man, Mr. Beggarstaff," he said. "It is extraordinary that you should speak in tones of such perfect confidence. As to terms, if I may mention so indelicate a subject——"

"Not at all," Beggarstaff said. "I have taken a thousand guineas out of your pocket-book; and any balance that remains, after raiding the war-chest, will amply repay me for my trouble."

CHAPTER X

A DEAL IN DIAMONDS

It was shortly after two o'clock that Beggarstaff walked into the

establishment of Rossiter & Co., and asked to see the proprietor. The Seer was attired in an immaculate grey frock suit, patent leathers, and a tie that was in itself a positive work of art. A polite assistant came forward and requested that Beggarstaff would walk into Mr. Rossiter's private office.

The establishment in question did a small but exclusive business with members of the aristocracy. Their profits were reputed to be large, but then, on the other hand, the credit they had to give was enormous. There were times when the head of the firm was hard put to it for a thousand pounds or so in ready cash, and this Beggarstaff knew, as indeed he knew most things connected with the West End of London.

Mr. Rossiter rose and bowed as Beggarstaff entered. His features indicated a mixture of curiosity and alarm.

"I hope there is nothing wrong, Mr. Beggarstaff!" he said. "No more American heiresses, I suppose? Another swindle like that and I should have to close my shop."

"Not to-day, Mr. Rossiter," Beggarstaff said gaily. "In the words of the immortal bard, I have come to put money in thy purse. Also, I am going to make a sporting offer. How much do you want for the hire of your shop for the day?"

Rossiter shook his head in puzzled astonishment. He knew something, by repute, of the strange doings of the man who called himself the Sage of Tyburn ; but then he was no reader of the *Sporting Press*, and his sense of humour was decidedly an unknown quantity. He shook his head this time resolutely.

"I fail to understand you," he said. "If this is some mad wager of yours, then I utterly decline——"

"Nothing of the kind, my dear sir. I simply want to hire your establishment, lock, stock, and barrel, assistants and all, from now till closing time this evening. Indeed, it is just possible that I shall want to dissolve partnership as early as four o'clock. Come, now, here is a tempting offer for you ! You know that I am a man of good reputation, and incapable of acting dishonourably towards you. At the same time, you have a couple of trusted assistants here who will see that nothing wrong is done. Five hundred pounds for the shop and its contents for the rest of the day !"

It was a tempting offer, as Beggarstaff said ; but the Bond Street tradesman hesitated. Five hundred pounds at the present moment meant a good deal to him, as his visitor happened to know.

"Most amazing !" the jeweller

muttered. "Yet I see you are thoroughly in earnest. But you are not going to do anything ridiculous ? You are not going to attract a crowd, or bring the name of my establishment conspicuously under the notice of the halfpenny papers ?"

"Nothing of the kind," Beggarstaff protested. "Not a soul will be any the wiser. Business will go on just as usual during the alteration—I mean, during the temporary partnership ; and before the house adjourns everything will be handed over to you just the same as it is now. And, what is more, I am prepared to put down the five hundred pounds in Bank of England notes at this moment."

Beggarstaff suited the action to the word. Nothing could be heard in the office for the moment but the crackling of crisp banknotes.

Five minutes later, and the banknotes were locked away in Mr. Rossiter's safe and the transaction was explained to the pair of polite assistants who had grown grey in the service of their masters. It was a little time later that Rossiter left the shop with reluctant footsteps, and the firm hand of Beggarstaff grasped the wheel.

"I am not going to interfere with you two at all," he said. "I propose to sit in the office and smoke cigarettes till the pear is ripe—I mean, until the drama is

sufficiently developed for the entrance of that famous actor Paul Beggarstaff. You are to go on with your work as if nothing had happened ; and if anybody wants to see Mr. Rossiter you are exceedingly sorry to say that he has gone away for the day. I think that is all."

True to his programme, Beggarstaff retired to the office and opened his cigarette-case. The clock had struck three before he glanced over the glass partition which gave an uninterrupted view of the shop, and saw that two ladies had entered. They were both young and fashionably dressed, just the class of high-grade customers who usually frequented Rossiter's establishment, and Beggarstaff noted with satisfaction that they had come on foot. He slipped out of the office, and stood behind the counter with an admirable mixture of self-sufficiency and humility which goes to the making of a really superior, up-to-date shop assistant.

"Is there anything that we can show you, madam?" he said. "You will prefer, perhaps, to choose for yourself?"

One of the visitors laughed pleasantly enough. She was tall and fair, with dark brown eyes full of vivacity and charm. It needed no one to tell Beggarstaff that he was face to face with the Princess Serena of Asturia. He

noted the waywardness and petulant charm of those features ; and he began to understand the parallel between the ruler of Asturia and King Lear. But there was no vice in that pleasant face, nothing but a little inherent weakness which the hand of time would soften.

"We came here to meet a friend," the Princess said. "He was to have been here at three o'clock. As a matter of fact, he is a relation of mine, and was good enough to promise me something valuable in view of my approaching——"

The speaker hesitated and blushed. Beggarstaff at once dashed gallantly into the breach.

"Of course," he said, in his best manner. "May I be permitted to congratulate you—that is—the fortunate individual in question? Still, it would save time, perhaps, if you proceeded with your selection pending the arrival of your distinguished friend."

"I should just love to," the Princess said simply. "If I have one passion more than another, it is for precious stones. Positively I am not safe when they are about."

Beggarstaff smiled in the obviously obsequious form prescribed as a reply by commercial tradition to such a remark. He waved his hands majestically to his assistants, as if implying that the whole

wealth of De Beers reclined darkly in the safe of the establishment. Be that as it may, the stock was an exceedingly seductive and well-chosen one, as the drawers began to give up their contents and the glass counter shone with streams of living fire. Impulsive and eager, the Princess fluttered from one tray to another like a butterfly in a garden full of tempting flowers. The clock was striking four when she glanced up impatiently at Beggarstaff.

"What is the use of wasting your time?" she said. "It is pretty certain that my friend is not coming; and I am not in a position to order anything for myself. We will return tomorrow, when I will take good care that my friend is here. Meanwhile we are sorry to have given all this trouble."

"Not at all," Beggarstaff murmured politely. "I assure you it is a pleasure to display our goods to a lady of such exquisite taste as yourself. Pray make your choice, so that anything you may choose can be placed on one side for you."

Beggarstaff bowed and retired to the office, whilst the gentlemanly assistants receded to break up those flashing squares and replace them to their proper positions. Then, presently animated tones arose from the shop, and a breathless assistant, pale and agitated, came into the office,

with a report that a large diamond cluster was missing from its case. Beggarstaff's brows bent in a frown. He stalked majestically into the shop.

The Princess stood there, smiling yet obviously nervous. Her companion, who had said nothing from first to last, was wiping her eyes with something which probably passed for a pocket-handkerchief.

"This is a serious matter, madam," Beggarstaff said. "I do not doubt for a moment that it is capable of explanations, but I am told that a diamond cluster is missing. If you will be so good as to give me your card I dare say——"

"But that is impossible," the Princess cried. "You do not know who I am. It is absolutely necessary that you should not know who I am. The thing is out of the question."

"Precisely," Beggarstaff said. "You will see that your reply is quite enough to arouse suspicion. In the circumstances I can do no more than send for a detective. Mr. Jones, will you ask the commissioner to step as far as Vine Street Police Station, and ask Inspector Brand to come here without delay?"

The pause which followed was as awkward as it was dramatic. The Princess stood there with a faint smile on her face, though her lips were trembling now, and

her dark eyes had an imploring look in them. Beggarstaff bent towards her and offered his arm.

"You are feeling just a little upset," he said. "Let me escort you as far as the office."

Without a word the Princess accepted Beggarstaff's support. The office door closed behind the trio, then there followed an eloquent silence which was ended at last by a sharp hysterical laugh from the Princess as she plunged her hand into a pocket of her coat, and something bright and shining fell upon the table.

"There," she cried, "did I not tell you that I could not resist those things? And nor would you if you had in your veins the blood of five hundred years of predatory ancestors. And now you will say no more about it, Mr. Rossiter. I acted on the spur of the moment. I always do act on the spur of the moment, and am generally bitterly sorry for it afterwards. Do let us out before that horrible detective comes along."

"You cut me to the heart," Beggarstaff said, his voice trembling with emotion. "It is so sad to see one so young and beautiful in a position like this. Believe me, if the matter were entirely in my hands, I would blot the whole painful thing from my memory. But you see I am not Mr. Rossiter—I am merely a partner who has come newly into

the business. The assistants know all about it, and Mr. Rossiter must be told. He is one of those hard, cold men, who always do everything on principle. He is a passive resister on principle. He would prosecute you on principle. You see, the fact of having returned that cluster does not palliate the offence."

"But you don't understand," the Princess cried. She was white and trembling now; her resemblance to Di Vernon had become faint and fragmentary. "You do not know whom we are, and I dare not tell you. I assure you it is no fault of mine. I cannot resist beautiful things. Usually the King—I mean, my father—pays for my purchases, and there is an end of the matter. You are young, and you have a good face. Do get us out of this. If you fail, there will be a scandal which will reach from one end of Europe to the other."

"You touch me to the core," Beggarstaff cried. "I am young, as you say. I have a beautiful wife and six charming children depending upon me. For their sakes and for yours I will do my best to act as a man of sentiment should do. Stay here a moment, until I see that the coast is clear. But there is one thing that I must insist upon. It is imperative that I have your address."

"But why?" the Princess urged. "Oh, Leopold, Leopold,

I would give five years of my life to have you here for as many minutes ! ”

“ Then why did you leave Leopold and your happy home ? ” Beggarstaff said. “ But cheer up. Leopold will be a happy man yet. You asked me why I wanted your address, and I will tell you. When the detective comes he will happily find that the bird is flown ; the sleuth-hound will be baulked of his prey ; but he will set himself doggedly to track his victim. The myrmidons of the law will be on his side, and you will be followed by hidden spies. It is for this reason that I want your address. I will take the man aside, and worm his dark secrets from him. I will invite his confidence ; and when he tells me that the wolf has marked down the lamb for slaughter, I will fly to you and let you know. I will arrange a means of escape, so that you can get away from London and never return.”

Beggarstaff laid his hand upon the bell, and ordered a cab without delay. He turned with a fatherly and encouraging smile upon the Princess, and bade her dry her eyes.

“ The cab is here,” he said. “ You can leave it all to me. I will invent some ingenious excuse for allowing you to depart like this. Come, there is no time to be lost ! ”

Beggarstaff hustled his visitors through the shop and placed them in the waiting hansom.

“ You are safe for the present,” he whispered. “ But there is one thing : I have not yet your address.”

“ *Long’s Hotel*,” the Princess sobbed. “ Suite No. 3 ; and if it is necessary for you to come, you must ask for Countess Linda. I cannot sufficiently thank you for——”

“ Not at all,” said Beggarstaff. “ I have had my reward, I beg to assure you.”

CHAPTER XI

A MIDNIGHT CALL

A HANSOM dashed up to *Long’s Hotel* on the stroke of midnight ; and a distinguished-looking man in evening dress desired to know if it were possible to see the Countess Linda and her companion, whom he believed were at present occupying a suite of rooms in the house. The hall-porter was not quite sure, but he would see, if the gentleman would give his card. By way of reply the stranger produced a letter from his pocket which he desired to have conveyed to the Countess without delay.

Beggarstaff waited in the hall whilst the fateful missive was sent upstairs. The Countess and her friend had evidently been making a brave attempt to forget their

peril, for a heap of fluffy wraps on the sitting-room table testified to the fact that they had just returned from the theatre. A solemn footman presented a letter on a salver to the Countess, and desired to know if there was any reply. The Countess opened the envelope, and in a small, stifled voice asked that the gentleman below might be escorted upstairs.

"It is just what I feared, madam," she whispered huskily. "The letter is from that very gentlemanly partner of the jewellery man. He says here that the police have succeeded in getting on our track, and that we are not safe for more than an hour or so."

The Princess threw up her hands with a gesture of despair.

"Oh, why do I do these things?" she cried. "Why cannot I stay at home and be happy with the man I love? The only man who has any real power over me. Why am I led astray by handsome English priests in an interesting state of health after painful operations? But what is to be done, Linda?"

"We must rely upon the gentlemanly jeweller," the Countess said. "I am sure that he has been kindness itself. He has fallen in love with you, as everybody does. I feel certain that he has found some way of baffling those horrid police; but here he comes."

Beggarstaff entered the room

hurriedly. He placed his hand upon his heart, as if to still its painful beatings. His air, as he closed the door, was redolent of transpontine melodrama.

"I have not come too late," he whispered. "I see I am in time to save one—I beg pardon, two—of the most beautiful of their sex. It was not a minute after you had gone before the detective came along. Only a few seconds elapsed before Mr. Rossiter returned. I put them off with ingenious evasions, I fought your battles, I even resigned my partnership for your sweet sake—I mean, for your sweet sakes. But I did not leave the detective. I contrived to worm myself into his confidence. I even went so far as to ask him to come and dine with me——"

"I see," the Princess cried. "You drugged his wine."

"There is a woman's instinct for you!" Beggarstaff exclaimed. "Ladies, it is even as you say. At the present moment the sleuth-hound of the law sleeps, but it will not be for long. He will awake presently, thirsting for the blood of his victim. I calculate that in half an hour he will be hot upon the track. You have no time to lose. You must fly from hence without delay. Once safe in your country, and you can laugh the laws of England to scorn."

"But how are we to get away?" the Princess asked. "I have not

sufficient money to pay the hotel bill. It is true that the packing of our wardrobe is no great matter——”

“Then let it be done at once,” Beggarstaff said darkly. “Ring for your maid, and tell her that you are called back unexpectedly to, let us say, Asturia, for instance, or any of those Grand Duchies of Central Europe. As to your hotel bill, I will see to that. Also, I have mapped out for you a proper plan of escape. By telegram and telephone it has all been arranged. At half-past twelve a special train awaits you at Charing Cross Station, reaching Dover an hour later. Even at this moment a special boat is at the Admiralty Pier pending your arrival. Everything is paid for, and everything is settled. At Calais you will find a train ready for you, to convey you to—once more let us say—Asturia.”

The Princess smiled through her tears. There was just the suggestion of mischief in her dark eyes.

“You are a most wonderful man,” she murmured. “Is it usual in this country for shopkeepers to embark upon these romantic adventures for the sake of ladies whom they have never seen before?”

“You mistake me,” Beggarstaff said. “It is true that a cruel fate has wrapped me in an environment of cold commerce ;

but Nature intended me for a poet. At any rate, if I was not destined for that high honour, I have at least in me the making of a playwright. But we are wasting time. Ring the bell, and give your orders to your maid. I will see you to the cab.”

“You are a most delightful person,” the Princess cried. “Positively, I feel as if I were in the midst of romance of your own creating and I have a strong suspicion that this is an adventure very much after your own heart.”

Beggarstaff bowed his thanks. As a matter of fact, had she but known it, the Princess had divined the situation to a nicety.

Beggarstaff was loth to separate himself finally from the most fascinating princess in Europe, a reason why he probably insisted upon seeing the fugitives safe into their train at Charing Cross.

The great arch was reached at length, a special train stood there waiting for its distinguished passenger. Beggarstaff lingered just a moment as the Princess thanked him. The gratitude in her dark eyes filled him with a glowing sense of rectitude. Looking at the matter from a high ethical point of view, the Seer of Tyburn ought to have been thoroughly well ashamed of himself. But painful as it is to relate, he was nothing of the kind. Indeed, he regarded the whole thing as a

kind of cameo amongst his many adventures.

"Good-bye," the Princess said sweetly, as she extended her hand to Beggarstaff. "Good-bye, and try to imagine that I have thanked you as I should have done. Good-bye."

Beggarstaff raised the slender hand to his lips and kissed it fervently.

"Good-bye to you, madam," he said. "The blood of five hundred years of predatory ancestors may trouble you sometimes, but on the whole I regard Leopold as a lucky man. Be good to Leopold, be discreet, and silent, and I will be the same. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XII

THE ELDERLY ADONIS

BEGGARSTAFF stepped briskly across the floor of the brilliantly lighted reception-room, feeling pretty well secure in his present disguise. Not that he had made very much change in his appearance; he was too consummate an artist for that.

His dress-coat had the cut and finish of Bond Street, his linen was as immaculate as usual, but he gave the bystander an impression that here was a man not altogether accustomed to these things. As to the rest, he wore a short brown beard and neatly trimmed side-whiskers. At a first glance any one would have taken

him for a Colonist who had recently made money on a large scale, and this was just the impression that Beggarstaff meant to convey. An exceedingly pretty girl standing in an alcove started as Beggarstaff addressed her.

"You don't recognise me, Miss Peyton," he said. "Which, after all, is a compliment to the subtlety of my disguise."

"But how did you get here?" the pretty girl asked. "You told me a few days ago that you did not know Lady Hawkhurst. Surely you don't mean to say——"

"Indeed I do," Beggarstaff said, in his coolest possible fashion. "I regret that Lady Hawkhurst is unknown to me, but that does not prevent my attending her receptions, does it? Trifles like that are nothing to anybody who expects to make a good thing out of the seer industry. But, confess it now, were you not a little afraid that I was going to throw you over?"

Laura Peyton coloured, laughing slightly.

"I thought so," Beggarstaff went on. "As a matter of fact, I have been exceedingly busy over that affair of yours for the last few days. But, first of all, let me explain. For the moment the Seer of Tyburn has ceased to exist, and in his place behold the interesting lineaments of Rodney Lee, the *dernier cri* in the way of South African millionaires."

"But Mr. Lee actually exists," Laura Peyton protested. "I understood that he was in Paris, though, as yet, London society has seen nothing of the man who found those fabulous gold mines."

"That is precisely where I come in," Beggarstaff said coolly. "For about eight-and-forty hours I take the liberty of borrowing Mr. Lee's identity. I may tell you that Mr. Lee is at present staying—that is, I am at present staying—at 741, Park Lane, which has been rented—furnished—from Sir Harry Savage, who, by the way, is a great personal friend of mine."

"Sir Harry is in Egypt," Miss Peyton said.

"Oh, I know that perfectly well. I had to take Savage into my confidence, and, to do him justice, he sees the joke. The house in Park Lane is entirely at my disposal, servants and all. Lady Hawkhurst thinks that I got here by mistake, but she is quite ready to pardon the solecism in a man of my immense wealth."

"Rather awkward for the real Simon Pure when he turns up," Miss Peyton laughed softly. "Don't you think so?"

"Well, yes," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "It will be interesting to watch developments in that direction, but it was all necessary in the working out of the scheme for setting the gallant general—your father—free from

his chains. Mind you, I have not yet seen Mrs. Borrodaile; indeed it has not been necessary. Is that the lady in green who is flirting with your father so vigorously in the alcove where the ferns are?"

"That is the woman," Laura said icily. "Of course, she is an absolute adventuress, and is only marrying my father for his money. It is absolutely ridiculous—a foolish thing—for a man at his time of life to fall in love with a woman of that class. No one knows anything about her, though she is so magnificently dressed, and has so pleasant a house in Audley Street."

"Mars and Venus," Beggarstaff murmured, "if I may be so allowed to put it. The General has still a fine figure of a man, but it occurs to me that he is not so deeply infatuated as you imagine."

"Infatuated he is," Miss Peyton replied, "but genuinely in love—never. I believe in his heart of hearts my father would not be sorry to be well out of it. Only unfortunately——"

"I understand," Beggarstaff said, "she flatters him. She also understands the art of serving the exact class of dinner that the military gourmet appreciates. I presume, as the General has some little reputation as a literary man, certain letters have passed between the pair—the sort of letters that cause unbounded

amusement when they are read in court."

"I am afraid so," Laura Peyton said. "Mr. Beggarstaff, I shall be eternally grateful to you if you will find some way of breaking off this ridiculous business and obtaining possession of my father's correspondence—of that adventure—"

"She is that," Beggarstaff said, "I ascertained so much in the course of my inquiries. I have elicited some interesting information touching Mrs. Borrodaile's past. I also find that I am acquainted with the career of the late lamented Borrodaile of pious memory. You may make your mind perfectly easy. Within the next eight-and-forty hours Mrs. Borrodaile shall return your father's letters, and in my presence she will inform him that all is over between them. No; you need not thank me. This is a comedy after my own heart, and the amount of pure enjoyment I shall get out of it will be sufficient reward for me. As a matter of fact, the campaign is not likely to cost a penny. Now, does that satisfy you?"

"You are a wonderful man!" Laura Peyton cried. "And I understand that you never fail when you make a promise of this kind. What are you going to do next?"

"I am going to have a little conversation with Mrs. Borro-

daile," Beggarstaff said coolly. "I suppose you couldn't call your father aside for a few minutes?"

"Oh, I could do it," said Laura dubiously. "But, still——"

"Never mind. I think I can see a better way than that. In this case a direct frontal attack on the fortress is likely to be more effective than a strategic movement. Now go on with your amusement; and rest assured that I shall be as good as my word."

So saying, Beggarstaff turned away, and strolled along in the direction of the large alcove at the end of the room where the two people in whom he was so deeply interested were seated. General Peyton was typical of the retired general—short, erect, with grey hair and a waxed moustache, that gave him the suggestion of fierceness, which was by no means compatible with his easy-going nature. The woman by his side was no longer in her first youth, but she was handsome enough in a dark, hawk-like kind of way, and her dress unmistakably bore the stamp of Paris. Beggarstaff noted all these little points in his quick way; then he stepped forward in a most impressive manner, and laid his hand gravely on the woman's shoulder.

"Miranda," he said, "this is a fateful meeting."

Mrs. Borrodaile looked up swiftly. Her features glowed with

indignation. Even the conventional freedom of a modern drawing-room, tinged with the leaven of Bohemianism, resents the fact of a perfect stranger accosting a lady by her Christain name in so deliberate a fashion. Hot words rose to the woman's lips, but Beggarstaff stood there shaking his head gravely.

"As I said before," he repeated, "this is a fateful moment, Miranda. Little did I expect when I came here to-night that I should find myself face to face with the relict of my dear friend Taffy Borrodaile. I have sought you near, I have sought you far, from Greenland's icy mountains to Indian's coral strand."

"This is an outrage!" General Peyton cried.

He jumped to his feet, and regarded Beggarstaff with menacing eyes. The latter continued to shake his head. He had a solemn, not to say wooden, expression of countenance that filled the general with exasperation.

"You do not seem to understand," he said. "How should you guess the touching romance which is going on here under the eyes of a cold and frivolous world! General Peyton, you will excuse me, I am sure. I have heard of you before, your fame has reached me in the far-off land. I believe you to be in every sense of the word a soldier and gentleman. Would you, therefore, mind leav-

ing myself and Mrs. Borrodaile alone for a few moments?"

"But what the deuce—I mean what are you driving at?" the General cried. "You look sober enough——"

"A total abstainer from my boyhood," Beggarstaff said gravely. "You do not seem to understand, sir, that I am the bearer of a message—a message from the dead."

General Peyton stammered something that sounded like an apology. He would have retired only that Mrs. Borrodaile laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"One moment," she said. "It would simplify matters very much if this gentleman would kindly tell us his name."

"Rodney Lee," Beggarstaff explained. "Lately home from South Africa. I have no card with me, but for the present I am living at 74I, Park Lane, which house——"

"Quite so," Mrs. Borrodaile said graciously. Her smile for Beggarstaff was of the sweetest. "Not another word of explanation is necessary. It is quite evident, my dear General, that this gentleman has a private message to deliver to me from my poor, dear Tuffy. In the circumstances——"

The General bowed, and turned on his heel, leaving Beggarstaff and Mrs. Borrodaile alone together. The Seer's face was still grave and sad, as if some one had touched

the chord of a bygone memory. and set his heartstrings quivering, On the whole, it was an admirable piece of acting, and Beggarstaff had done nothing more artistic in his many-coloured career.

"My dear Miranda," he said, "you have guessed it correctly. I come to you with a message from beyond the tomb."

Mrs. Borrodaile made a brave effort to appear duly sympathetic, but she only succeeded in looking bored. If ever she had nourished a deep affection for the bygone Tuffy, it was evident that she had learnt to bear her grief with truly Christian fortitude.

"It is two years ago now," Beggarstaff went on, with a note of gloom in his voice—"two years ago since I saw the last of the man who had the great happiness to possess your undying affection. For your sake he had gone abroad to try and retrieve his shattered fortunes. Only I knew how deeply he felt the parting."

Mrs. Borrodaile sighed—a tribute to the virtues of the departed. It was not her cue to remind Beggarstaff that Borrodaile had been a drunken scoundrel, who most emphatically had left his country for his country's good. She looked down at her shapely shoes, and sighed once more faintly.

"Were you with him at the last?" she asked.

"I was," Beggarstaff went on.

"We were in the ill-fated *Ocean Queen* together. Together we were wrecked; we were thrown up on the typical—that is, on a desert—*island*, and it was my melancholy task to cheer my dear friend and receive his last wishes. His final words were of you. He thought of your future; it embittered his dying moments; and there and then I made him a sacred promise if ever I got away from my surroundings—if ever fame and fortune fell to my lot—I gave my sacred word of honour that your welfare should be my great consideration."

"I am curious to know how," Mrs. Borrodaile murmured.

"Miranda," Beggarstaff replied solemnly, "the thing is simplicity itself! I promised Tuffy to marry you."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECOND VOLUME

It was greatly to Mrs. Borrodaile's credit that she repressed the wild laughter which trembled on her lips. She glanced at the speaker; she could not doubt for a moment that he was absolutely and entirely in earnest; and here spread out before her on the glittering plain of opportunity was what she supposed to be the chance of a lifetime.

Naturally enough she had heard a good deal of the new South African millionaire, Rodney Lee,

whose fabulous fortune had been the talk of the smart set lately. And here was the very man himself, simple and unaffected, green as the grass radiating under an April sunshine, ready to fulfil the last wishes of the dear departed.

Visions roseate and tender rose before the woman's eyes. She saw herself enthroned in Park Lane, mistress of the first establishment in London, she saw grouse moors and steam yachts down a long avenue of never-ending delights. One thing she did not see; that the rather wooden-looking young man by her side was reading her thoughts like an open book. Not for a moment did Beggarstaff relax the artistic stupidity of his expression.

"I dare say you are taken by surprise," he said. "As a matter of fact, I am a little bit taken by surprise myself. When a fortuitous craft in the pearl-trading way snatched me from that burning island, I was as poor as I am now rich. I should have come to England at once and sought you out, but I had not the means to do so. I drifted to South Africa, where I found the fortune which I have since realised. I may say that my very presence here to-night was an accident. Directly I saw you, some instinct seemed to tell me that I had come to the end of my long search. I did not need to ask whom you were. I knew it. This, Miranda, is Fate."

"I suppose it is," Mrs. Borrodaile said practically. "And so you were with my poor husband at the last?"

"Well, not literally," Beggarstaff said. "You see, I left him to all practical purposes at his last breath, for he was too ill to be removed, and some part of the crew of the pearling trader was staying there for the next few weeks until the vessel could get back to the nearest port. But you may take it from me that dear old Tuffy was at his last gasp when we parted."

"Let us hope—I mean, let us pray—that the poor, dear boy was comfortable, and that his end was untroubled." Mrs. Borrodaile said, recovering herself neatly. "Of course, Mr. Lee, I could not possibly be blind to some of Tuffy's little weaknesses."

"Naturally, naturally," Beggarstaff said airily. "He had an exceedingly neat and dexterous way of assimilating a bottle of whisky. But then did not great men like Pitt and Fox, and others, share the same amiable failing? With all his faults, our Tuffy was very dear to me. Had he not been so, do you suppose that I should have solemnly consented to make his widow mine? Though I may hasten to add that, having once seen you, I recognise that my ostensible sacrifice is nothing less than a notable gain."

Mrs. Borrodaile looked down

once again at her shapely feet, and something like a blush mantled to her cheek.

"I am afraid you are a man accustomed to having his own way," she said. "I believe in circumstances like these, the proper thing is for the lady to hang her head, and suggest that it is all so sudden. In my case, it seems to me that the excuse would be a good one. I take it that it is very seldom a man asks a woman to marry him before they have been introduced even. But in this case, Mr. Lee, there is an obstacle. I have not yet given you any sort of answer to your question. Indeed, it would be indelicate of me to do so for some time, as I appreciate the compliment you have paid me."

"Spoken like the helpmeet of dear old Tuffy!" Beggarstaff cried. "But touching this obstacle. Do not tell me, at the very moment when the cup of happiness is at my lips, that you love another!"

Mrs. Borrodaile blushed and simpered. It was this latter trait that told Beggarstaff that the woman by his side was older than she looked. Art had done much for her, but the simper boldly proclaimed the fatal fifth decade.

"Well, not exactly that," she stammered. "You see, I am a lone woman. I have no natural taste for the frivolities of society, but I must do something to cheer

a heart which has suffered from contact with the world. It was only a few days ago that General Peyton did me the honour of asking me to share his lot."

"And you consented!" Beggarstaff cried. "This is a blow, disguise it as I will. This is unmistakably a blow. Tell me, have you promised in writing? Have letters passed between you? That elderly son of Mars is pretty well preserved, and I should say he was fairly—that is, I mean he is very young for his years. I should think on the whole that he could write a very good love-letter."

"Oh, he does," Mrs. Borrodaile cried unguardedly. "I have six of his letters altogether. All of them delightfully prim and old-fashioned, but none the less businesslike for that."

"I know," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "Loud laughter in court, and all that kind of thing. But that does not in the least matter. You must see quite clearly, Miranda, that this thing is in the hands of Fate. It was Fate that impelled me to accede to Tuffy's wishes. It was Fate that brought me here to-night. It was Fate that made me the instrument to rescue General Peyton. Of course, I mean to rescue you from a loveless match with a man so much older than yourself. You shall be the bride of my heart. You shall come and transform the cold marble halls of

Park Lane into the rosy warmth of home. I will fetch General Peyton and tell him so."

Mrs. Borrodaile showed some sentiments of alarm. She would have restrained Beggarstaff, but he darted impulsively from her side in search of the General. After all, the adventuress made up her mind, better—far better—to be the wife of this simple-hearted millionaire than share the lot of the General, who held certain narrow views on the subject of woman's economy. A few moments later, and Beggarstaff was back again, dragging the General impulsively in his train.

"This is very pitiful," he said. "It fills me with the deepest grief, my dear sir, to have to break to you the sad intelligence that you will have to resign all claim to the hand of Mrs. Borrodaile. The noble and beautiful woman by my side has changed her mind. As a soldier and a man of honour you will admit that this little prerogative has been the privilege of charming women ever since Eve changed her mind on the great fruit question, and thus paved the way for our modern civilization. You will pardon me if I speak at some length, for usually I am a man of few words. At the present moment I am inebriated with the exuberance of my own verbosity, carried away on the flood-tide of a great affection. In other words, you cannot marry Mrs.

Borrodaile, because I am going to do so myself."

Mrs. Borrodaile glanced up swiftly, but if she had expected to note any signs of dismay or anger on the face of her warrior she was doomed to disappointment. It seemed to Beggarstaff that the General's expression was more indicative of relief than any other emotion. He appeared to be waiting for further details.

"It is this way," Beggarstaff went on. "I presume you are not acquainted with Mrs. Borrodaile's first husband. You knew nothing whatever of the many virtues of Tuffy."

"The name reaches me for the first time," the General said frostily. "I have never heard it before."

"Quite so," Beggarstaff went on. "He was our—I should say her first husband. He was a bosom friend of mine. I was with him almost to the last. With one of his expiring breaths he made me give a solemn promise that I would marry his widow. I gave the desired assurance. Directly fortune came to me I returned to England, only to find Miranda for the first time to-night. One glance at the beauty of her face convinced me that my active duty was nothing less than the crowning glory of my career. To be quite practical, I understand that certain letters have passed between you, which letters must

be interchanged. It will be a great pleasure to me if you will both call upon me to-morrow at 741, Park Lane, and discuss the matter over a cup of tea. Need I say any more to a gentleman and a soldier like yourself!"

"You have said quite enough, sir," the General said stiffly. "I will make it a point of calling at your house to-morrow at the time indicated. As to my letters——"

"I will be there, also," Mrs. Borrodaile said sweetly. "I think, General, we can arrange matters between myself and—er—Rodney."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLIGHTED ROMANCE

BEGGARSTAFF spent a busy morning, principally in the Chief Post Office at St. Martin's-le-Grand, whence he despatched one or two expensive telegrams to Egypt, to say nothing of a small port at the entrance to the Red Sea. This being done, he had nothing now but to wait till five o'clock for the conclusion of the comedy. He had despatched a short note to Laura Peyton, telling her that she had nothing to fear, and that the lapse of a few hours would see the General free, and in a position to make a fool of himself again at the first favourable opportunity.

This being done, he lunched at his club, and, after assuming his last night's hirsute disguise in

Tyburn Square, proceeded leisurely in the direction of Park Lane. There, addressed to Rodney Lee, was a long letter from Sir Harry Savage, in which the latter promised implicitly to obey Beggarstaff's instructions. It was evident from the gist of the letter that the baronet knew all about the plot by means of which General Peyton was to be saved from his fate. Beggarstaff tore the letter up, and pitched it in the drawing-room grate.

"That's all right!" he murmured to himself. "If only Savage engineers that telegram all right, it ought to arrive about six o'clock. It is only delay in this matter that I have to fear."

It was a little after five when Mrs. Borrodaile arrived. She looked especially charming in grey and silver, with a large black lace picture hat. It was only by a dexterous movement on Beggarstaff's part that he saved himself from a chaste salute. He hastened to get the perfectly appointed tea equipage between his visitor and himself. Then he indicated a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" he said. "I am sorry, but my aunt is not here. The fact of the matter is, the dear old lady is in bed. She is a wonderful old creature, and I know you will be charmed with her; but here comes the General. Johnson, you may bring the tea up at once.

Mrs. Borrodaile will do the honours of the table."

The General bowed stiffly. He sat in a chair bolt upright, like a ramrod. In his left hand he carried, with considerable ostentation, a packet of letters, which he placed mathematically in the crown of his hat.

"The letters," Beggarstaff murmured. "I see that you have brought them all, my dear General. It was good of you to call our attention to the business side of this interview without any painful directness in the way of words. I propose we get this part of the interview over at once. Miranda, dearest Miranda, will you kindly produce your share of the—I mean, the General's communications to you? Did you not tell me there were six of them?"

"There were six," General Peyton said frigidly; "and I have five here. Mrs. Borrodaile will correct me if I have made a mistake. Let me hand them over to you."

"And let me give you mine," Mrs. Borrodaile said sweetly.

With an air of great solemnity, Beggarstaff took the eleven envelopes and sorted them out like a playing hand at cards. He was going to take no risks. Then, with the suggestion of a priest performing some sacred rite, he tore the envelopes across, and dropped them into the heart of the fire.

"I am sorry, my dear General," he said, "to dispel your little romance like this, but you will see at once that between Miranda and myself there is a distinct affinity. I am not a superstitious man, but when I met Miranda last night I felt sure that Fate had taken two lives into its hands. You will excuse me if I am forced to the conclusion that one of those lives was not yours. If it had been your privilege to have known Tuffy——"

"You need say no more," the General said. "I can quite see for myself that Mrs. Borrodaile has acted with commendable prudence in the circumstances. I do not know if you are a very old friend of the gentleman whom you allude to as Tuffy——"

"Years," Beggarstaff said. "We were boys together. On three distinct occasions he saved my life."

"And yet he never mentioned it," Mrs. Borrodaile murmured.

"He wouldn't," Beggarstaff cried. "Such was the noble nature of the man. Once by water, once by fire, and once by the life of an assassin I was rescued by my friend. My dear Miranda, the General will take another muffin, just to show that no feeling of animosity remains. I am quite sure that the General will take another muffin."

"Nothing of the kind," General Peyton said hastily. "There is no animosity whatever. And no

reason to immolate my digestion on the altar of your charming muffins. If you will excuse me, I will not detain you any longer. There is rather an important consultation at the War Office in which I desire——”

The speaker's voice trailed off into a whisper, as he bowed himself out of the room. Mrs. Borrodaile leant back in her chair and laughed. She tapped Beggarstaff fraternally on the arm.

“The old boy took it very well,” she said. “What do you think?”

Beggarstaff shook his head gravely. He appeared to be listening for something. Presently the door opened. A servant entered with a cablegram, which he proceeded to hand to his temporary employer.

“A foreign message,” Beggarstaff murmured. “Something to do with my mines, I suppose. If you will excuse me——”

Beggarstaff tore open the envelope, and proceeded to read the lines therein. He stood for a moment perfectly still, then the paper fluttered from his fingers and dropped upon the floor. His gaze in the direction of his visitor was a wonderful admixture of regret and consternation. It flashed across the woman's mind that Beggarstaff had suddenly lost all his money.

“Something very unpleasant has happened,” she hazarded.

“A calamity!” Beggarstaff said, in a hollow voice. “Fortunately the full force of the blow will be mine, and not yours. My happiness, Miranda, has been of so recent a growth that I shall be able to pluck it out of my heart before it has become an integral part of my existence. Not to keep you in suspense any longer. let me tell you that our only Tuffy is still alive.”

“Oh, rats!” Mrs. Borrodaile cried. “I mean it is absolutely impossible! Why, you told me that you had left him for dead.”

“So I did!” Beggarstaff almost wept. “He must have recovered in some marvellous fashion. But read the telegram for yourself. You will see that it comes from the port of Suez. Here is what it says: ‘Lee, 741, Park Lane, Delighted to hear your good fortune. Only found out yesterday. Cable money, get me London. Explain when reach.—TUFFY.’ Now, my sainted Miranda, nothing can be plainer than that. We shall have to possess our souls in patience until the wanderer returns. Needless to say that I shall at once send the dear boy all that he desires. It will be always a source of consolation to me to know that I came so near to carrying out the wishes of my friend. But such happiness was not to be. Despite my wealth, there will always be a skeleton in my cupboard—the skeleton of a blighted

affection. But we need not despair, Miranda. It may be that Tuffy's wonderful agility in the drinking line will be the means of hastening on——But there! I must not let my mind dwell upon the point. When we meet Tuffy——”

“We are not going to meet Tuffy,” Mrs. Borrodaile said crisply. “Don't you believe it! You seem to be a very good fellow, Rodney Lee; but when you put your money on Tuffy, as they say in the States, you are barking up the wrong tree. This has been a bit of a blow to me, and I don't deny it. I should have married you, and we should have had a good time together; but the advent of Tuffy will put an end to all that. To be brutally frank, Tuffy was, and I have no doubt is, a bully and a blackguard of the first water so far as women are concerned. I have got a few thousand pounds now; I am going to stick to them. If that man finds me out, I shan't have a cent to bless myself with in a month. You can do what you like about cabling him money, but if you take my advice you won't send him a rap. As for me, I shall just have time to settle my matters in London, and then I am off to Paris.”

Beggarstaff placed his hand to his forehead in a pained kind of way. It was evident that these revelations had affected him deeply.

“You unman me,” he said. “To think that I should discover Tuffy to be a man of this class! But I must see him; I must hear his explanation. I cannot lose all the illusion of a lifetime in this fashion. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Borrodaile said crisply. “You can keep your mouth shut. You are going to give me your promise not to tell Tuffy anything. You are not even to hint that you have met me. Of course, I am asking you to tell a fair lot of lies on my account, but don't forget that if you betray me I am as good as ruined. Tell Tuffy I am dead. You are a pretty emotional sort of man, judging from the way you gushed about Tuffy last night; and I should think you would have no difficulty in drawing a pretty picture of yourself laying lilies on my grave, and all that sort of thing. But we are wasting time here, and I was never the one to sit down and weep over a tin of spilt milk. Ring the bell, and get one of your servants to call me a cab.”

A cab came at length; and Beggarstaff, with a countenance of neat and proper melancholy, escorted his visitor downstairs, and placed her in the hansom. She extended her hand with a smile; then a little sigh escaped her lips as she glanced at the noble elevation of the Park Lane house.

"Ah, well," she said, "it is all the fortune of war! I was never nearer to the heaven of my ambition, which is Park Lane, than I was last night. Good-bye; and promise me one thing—a discreet silence on the subject of my existence with Tuffy."

"I promise," said Beggarstaff, as he took the outstretched hand. "On my sacred honour, not a word to Tuffy!"

CHAPTER XV

THE LIBELLED VELASQUEZ

BEGGARSTAFF lay back in his chair, sipping his claret, and, on the whole, feeling well content with the way in which the world was moving. It was a Mouton Rothschild wine, comet vintage, and the whole room was deliciously perfumed with the bouquet of it. So to speak, it was a cameo amongst wines; and the three men round the table treated it with respect accordingly.

The Marquis of Glenlevett remarked with a sigh that he had very little left of the same bin. Also, he observed with pain that Miss Sadie Vandeker was spoiling her wine by eating a peach at the same time. The girl laughed as she reached for another from the dish in front of her.

"I guess it makes no difference," she said. "No American has the right education for these

gilt-edged things in the way of liquors. I know I haven't."

The speaker glanced round the dining-room, her dark eyes resting lovingly upon the magnificent carved oak, the old silver and the pictures on the walls. Glenlevett House was a perfect museum of all that was artistic and beautiful. *Circa* James I., and later on, in the eighteenth century, there had been two Glenlevetts endowed with the artistic temperament, much to the advantage of the present Marquis, whose fine old house was a repository equal to that of any show mansion in the kingdom.

More or less directly, Beggarstaff was down on business connected with the strange disappearance of a set of intaglios, which disappearance having been satisfactorily accounted for, the Seer was now remaining for a day or two as the guest of his grateful host. The party was made up by Mr. Phineas W. Vandeker and his charming daughter.

Needless to say, Vandeker had made his pile out somewhere in poetic West, and was now looking for some historic estate in England where he might settle down, and his daughter, in accordance with the eternal fitness of things, marry into the Peerage. For the rest, Miss Vandeker was a beauty of the florid type—a Rubens rather than a Romney; but there was no denying her physical and

intellectual charms. Her brilliant smile seemed to light up the room. She indicated all the artistic treasures with a dazzling wave of her arm. She turned as if for sympathy to Beggarstaff.

"This is what I envy the Marquis," she said. "I guess this is the kind of thing that money can't buy, though I believe my father offered the Marquis a kind of a fancy price for the whole thing just as it stands. Lord Glenlevett placed the house at our disposal in the spring; and for a whole delicious fortnight I wandered about the house, trying to imagine that it belonged to me, and that all those portraits in the gallery were my ancestors."

"I reckoned to take the house for three years," Vandeker said. "I sort of had it on trial; but I had to light out West quite unexpectedly, and the thing fell through. Maybe yet I shall see my way to take the house for three years."

Sadie's eyes lighted up at the prospect. She could not understand anybody being otherwise than happy in so perfect a place. All the same, there was a tinge of gloom on the lean, shaven face of the Marquis.

"We all have our troubles," he said, with the air of a man who admits the superior wisdom of a providence. "Nobody escapes them. For instance, I suppose you have all heard the misfortune

I had with those two Velasquez portraits of mine?"

"What was that?" Beggarstaff asked. "I have some dim recollection of the matter. Weren't they burnt, or something of that kind? You sold them, I believe?"

"I gave them away," Glenlevett explained. "It was my housekeeper who first called my attention to the thing; and, by the way, it was just after my friend Vandeker was staying here in the spring. The Velasquez had been moved to the Battle Bedroom. I may explain that the Battle Bedroom is carved oak with scenes from historic combats. It was the favourite room of Queen Elizabeth when she stayed here. Anyway, Miss Vandeker fell in love with the Velasquez, and they were removed to the Battle Bedroom, which I understand she occupied. But of course that has nothing to do with it. When my housekeeper asked me to look at the pictures I found that the paint had cracked in the most extraordinary way, and was hanging in flakes from the canvas, just like shreds of whitewash on a badly dried ceiling. There was nothing for it but to make the best of a bad bargain. Of course, I called in one of those restoring experts, but he could do nothing whatever."

Beggarstaff sipped his wine with

an air of profound sympathy. All the same, he was far more keenly interested than would have appeared. He glanced from the solemn features of Vandeker to the sparkling face of his daughter.

"It was a bold speculator who bought those pictures," he said. "I should like to know the name of that sportsman."

The Marquis waived the topic on one side.

"What does it matter?" he said. "Besides, I have not the least idea who the fellow was. He was apparently a dealer who came here to induce me to part with a Greuze, as he wanted to make up a pair for a customer. He took the Velasquez away with him, and there was an end of it."

"That is very strange," Beggarstaff said thoughtfully. "Is it possible that some pictures begin to perish after a certain time? For instance, everybody knows that Gainsborough's famous 'Blue Boy' is fading almost out of recognition. Painted canvas cannot last for ever; they must go some time, even as the 'One Horse Shay' is said to have collapsed; but your lordship is not alone in your misfortunes. I happen to know that the same thing took place at Willmott Castle some little time ago; but those pictures were not Velasquez—they were Rembrandts. Do you think that the change of atmo-

sphere had anything to do with it?"

"No, I don't," Glenlevett said. "For instance, there are another fine pair of portraits by Velasquez in the Tiring-Room leading out to the Battle Room; and I noticed yesterday that they were beginning to go in the same way. It is very annoying to see fifteen or twenty thousand pounds fading away under one's eyes like this. The best thing I can do is to sell the whole collection before any further damage is done. Only, unfortunately, that would not be quite an honourable proceeding. What?"

Beggarstaff allowed the subject to drop for a moment, and returned to it a little later on. He expressed a desire to see the pictures in question. That was, of course, if Miss Vandeker had no objection to his entering her dressing-room. The American beauty smiled a willing assent. She suggested that there need be no delay in examining those precious portraits.

The pictures stood in two recesses on each side of a marvelously carved fireplace. From a little distance they appeared to be absolutely intact; but a closer examination disclosed the fact that the paint was cracked across and across in a strange resemblance to the skin of a melon-rind. The paint seemed to have blistered also, as if it had been brought too

close to a fire. The dark, romantic faces were almost obliterated, and in certain portions the paint was hanging in flakes. Beggarstaff touched the surface of the pictures with a tender, sympathetic hand.

"I see one is much worse than the other," he said. "It is a most extraordinary thing, and your lordship has my sincere sympathy."

There was nothing more to be said or done, and the little cortège returned solemnly to the billiard-room. It was a little past eleven o'clock before Beggarstaff emerged from his bedroom. He had slipped off his dinner-jacket, and was wearing a rough coat instead. On his feet he had a pair of rubber-soled tennis-shoes. He felt his way along the corridor of the silent house, and paused at length by the door of the Tiring Room, where he sat himself down with great patience to listen.

The house was silent as the grave now; there was not a light anywhere to be seen. An hour or so passed before Beggarstaff's eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, noticed the thin slice of light rimming the edge of the door like some silver embroidery. He could hear some one now moving about inside the room. Presently he noticed a soft, sobbing sound, much as a fire makes in an open grate when there is a strong draught. For some considerable

time the strange sobbing noise went on. Then it ceased abruptly, and was heard no more. Fairly well satisfied with himself, Beggarstaff crept back to his room. Here he lighted a cigarette, and proceeded to think the matter out in his own thorough way.

"I think I have got it," he muttered. "Strange how often it is that one contrives to kill two birds with one stone! A close inspection of the family letter-bag for the next day or two ought to go a long way towards solving the mystery."

Beggarstaff was down betimes in the morning, but though he went carefully through the post-bag he seemed to find nothing that gave him the least satisfaction. On the third day, however, his patience was rewarded. He smiled as he turned over a business envelope, and carefully copied the embossed address on the flap into his pocket-book. There was nothing for it now but to invent an ingenious excuse for an immediate departure.

"I am afraid I shall have to go to town this morning," he explained as the party sat down to breakfast. "It is just possible that I may make it convenient to return in the course of the day. I shall be very disappointed if I lose my week-end here."

The Marquis was politely regretful; he sincerely hoped that Mr. Beggarstaff would see his way

to return. There was a look of regret in the bright eyes of Sadie Vandeker.

"You must try your hardest," she said. "I don't often meet an Englishman who knows so much about art as you do, and I just fairly dote on it. You have taught me more the last two days about the Old Masters than I ever knew before."

"This is flattering," Beggarstaff murmured. "I shall have to take your wishes in the light of a command. You may rest assured that it will be no fault of mine if I fail to return here in time for dinner. If I do get back, I propose to give you a lesson in art which will rather astonish you."

Sadie Vandeker laughed at the grave accent which Beggarstaff had assumed. She waved him a cordial farewell as the dog-cart disappeared down the drive. A little time later Beggarstaff was in high spirits as he drove along. He was on the track of an intrigue after his own heart—one of those delicate, ingenious problems, the solution of which he delighted in. The setting was romantic, too; and, like a true artist, Beggarstaff revelled in its atmosphere.

Once arrived at Paddington, he called a cab, and drove off promptly in the direction of the British Museum. Arrived there, he sent in his card, with a request that the Curator of the Prints

Department would grant him the favour of a short interview.

Apparently the interview was favourable, for Beggarstaff smiled to himself as he directed his cab to 24, Little Bond Street. The cab paused at length before an unpretentious establishment, in the window of which was one heavily framed picture, and over the door the legend "Reubens," in fat Gothic letters.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAND OF THE SERVANT

BEGGARSTAFF was pleased to find that Reubens was no *nom de plume*, but actually the name of the tenant of the shop. The place was dingy enough, and bore little appearance of any briskness in the way of trade; but then, as Beggarstaff remembered, there was a considerable slump in the picture industry, save in the matter of Old Masters and modern millionaires.

A jaunty clerk came forward, and asked Beggarstaff's business. He froze the man with a look, and intimated that he had come to see Mr. Reubens on a matter of importance which could not be conveyed through the medium of a subordinate. Simon Pure himself—who beyond all question had been listening to the foregoing conversation—appeared, with a softness and noiselessness

which were absolutely wonderful in a man of his enormous bulk.

He stood there with the dingy light falling on his face. His features were veritable bags and rolls of fat ; his smile was effusive and carneying. It would have been a poor judge of character who had not disliked this man intensely and heartily on the spot. All the same, as Beggarstaff did not fail to notice, he was exceedingly well dressed, and there was a pleasing absence of jewellery about him. It was more the shifty cunning of his small eyes than anything else that set Beggarstaff on his guard.

"You are Mr. Reubens himself?" he asked.

"I am that, sir!" the dealer replied. There was no mistaking his German nationality directly he opened his mouth. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

Beggarstaff looked vaguely about him. He wanted to convey the impression of being a rich man who was looking for some easy means of disposing of his wealth without undue exertion.

"Pictures!" he said, with a large wave of his hand. "You see, I am only in England for a short time, and I have other establishments to visit. Fact is, I am an American. I'm just building myself a little place on Fifth Avenue, New York, that will cost a couple of million dollars or so ; and I

want some of your class of wall-paper to hang around. If you can fix me up, I have got half a million or so to play with."

Reubens literally fell at Beggarstaff's feet and called him blessed. Here was the class of customer which every right-minded dealer prays for, and but few encounter more than once in a lifetime. Visions of large cheques for Old Masters manufactured on the premises rose before Herr Reubens's delighted eyes. An ecstatic perspiration bespangled his dome-like forehead.

"This way, if you please, sir. *This way*," he gurgled.

He spoke as if he were pointing the road to some exclusive heaven of his own to which only customers of Beggarstaff's type were admitted. A long, well-lighted room on the second floor was practically filled with pictures, which Beggarstaff surveyed coldly.

"I don't want anything modern," he said. "We can get modern work by the cartload. Murillo, Michael Angelo: those are the sort of canned goods I am after. If you haven't got any on show, I'll just trot along to Bond Street, and give some of the merchants there a chance. Say, have you got what I want?"

"Oh, my very good sir—my *very* good sir—we have everything! There is nothing we cannot show you. This way, if you please!"

Once more Beggarstaff followed to a room on the top floor, absolutely filled with treacle-coloured studies in various stages of decay and neglect. Everything seemed to be arranged with an eye to artistic effect—that is, from the point of view of the customer who must be impressed with the fact that he is getting amazing value for his money. Reubens smiled as he indicated the works of the dead and gone great.

"They are here, positively all here," he whispered, as one speaks in the presence of the dead. "All the mighty masters are present around you. Here is a Murillo, for five thousand pounds. Positively, I am losing money on that, but then it is necessary to have a little cash at times. Or what do you say to this Raphael?"

Very gravely Beggarstaff, glass in eye, proceeded down a row of dingy daubs much as a general inspects a regiment; then he turned in his coolest possible way to the perspiring Reubens.

"How much for the family party?" he asked crisply.

"Say, one hundred thousand pounds!" the staggered Reubens replied. "One hundred thousand pounds for a fine picture-gallery complete. Some day it will be worth double the money."

"I'll give you five-and-twenty pounds for the lot," Beggarstaff said sweetly, "and I'll throw back those masterpieces so long

as you deliver the frames intact. My good man, you appear to think that you are dealing with a fool; and you might just as well confess at once that there is not a yard of canvas here which hasn't been faked up by some drunken derelict of an artist at so much a foot. I am a busy man, and you are simply wasting my time. If you have anything really worth showing me, trot it out."

"Ah, my dear sir, you are a man after my own heart!" Reubens cried, quite unabashed. "I see you are not to be deceived. I have a few—just a very few—pictures which I only show to those who are capable of appreciating the real Art. Will you come this way?"

It was a room at the top of the house, quite a small room, and Beggarstaff could see that the walls were lined with iron, and that the door was like unto the door of a safe. Here on the floor lay some score or so of pictures mounted on stretchers and devoid of frames. Reubens turned eagerly to his companion.

"Now, what might your particular vanity be?" he said. "Let us take them as they come. Here is a Rembrandt, 'Portrait of a Burgomaster's Wife! No rubbish there, eh? There is breadth, there is atmosphere.'"

Reubens had entirely lost his servile manner. He spoke now as one in the inner brotherhood

to another ; and Beggarstaff forgot his purpose for the moment in his admiration of the picture. One after the other was turned to the light. There was no boasting or chicanery here : the pictures were alive, breathing genuine.

"A grand lot," Beggarstaff said. "I should like to take them all, but you have not yet shown me the Velasquez."

Reubens started, and looked a little uneasily at Beggarstaff. He wiped his domelike forehead in an agitated way.

"I do not understand," he stammered. "Pardon me, sir, but I said nothing about a Velasquez. They so seldom come in the way of a comparatively poor man like myself."

Beggarstaff stood abstractedly tracing the outline of a cherub's nose with his forefinger.

"There are occasions," he murmured, "when dealers are glad to get rid of a picture. You see, sometimes it becomes necessary for one of your aristocrats to raise a little ready money. How easier than by selling a family heirloom ? He comes to see you, for instance. You give him a few thousand pounds, and an ingeniously faked copy of that picture, and the thing is done. Unfortunately, cases have been known when the heir to the property has created unpleasantness, and the picture has had to be

restored. Equally unfortunately the process of restoration is not mutual, and the poor dealer drops his dollars. Is that so ? "

Reubens's little eyes lighted up angrily.

"Ah, yes !" he exclaimed. "I have been in that cart myself. Then, my dear sir, it behoves me to get rid of that picture as soon as possible. A rich American like you comes along, he pays for the treasure in cash. I do not even know his name, I am sorry that the picture cannot be traced. These things do not get in the papers ; there is seldom any scandal. But, look you, I get not so good a price when I have to dispose of a work of art in that fashion ! "

"Quite so," Beggarstaff said drily. "That is exactly what I am getting at. I am a rich American, quite ready to pay in cash. Moreover, I lack the inquisitiveness of my race. To be quite plain, my good Reubens, have you got any small deer of that kind on your hands at present ? "

Reubens hesitated. It seemed to Beggarstaff that he was eyeing him suspiciously ; but the latter was still abstractedly at work on the tip-tilted nose of the cherub.

"You were asking just now about a Velasquez," Reubens whispered, speaking as if his throat were full of crumbs. "I had forgotten that I had two of

them, which I will sell to you for three thousand guineas apiece. They come from a nobleman in the North of England, who was compelled to part with them to pay his racing debts. I will not disguise from you, my dear sir, that I bought those pictures cheap. The heir to the property is not on good terms with his uncle; as if he found out—Ah, you understand!"

Reubens turned away, and produced from a recess a couple of pictures, which he proceeded to unroll, and lay out upon the floor, where the filtered light of the sun might shine upon them. He handled them with loving care; he pointed out their manifold beauties, like the artist and connoisseur that he undoubtedly was.

"Three thousand guineas!" he said, with a passionate regret. "Ah, if I could only afford to keep them! It is like parting with my heart's blood when I sell a picture of this class. But then they are dangerous to keep; and I am a poor man, who makes his money hard. Three thousand guineas, late the property of a nobleman in the North of England who had his debts of honour to pay! Shall we say it is a deal? Never was such a bargain."

"You are quite right there!" Beggarstaff said crisply. He had changed his tone altogether. He grasped the astonished Reubens

by his little fat ear, and led him from the room. Then he banged the door and placed the key in his pocket. "You rascal! I know where these pictures come from. What am I going to do? I am going to take you round to the office of Messrs. Ely & Ely, in Lewis Place, and settle matters there. If you are wise, you will come quietly."

CHAPTER XVII

THE UPPER HAND

MISS SADIE VANDEKER expressed her pleasure at seeing Beggarstaff back in time for dinner. He murmured his gratification in suitable language. He hoped, he said, to be able to add considerably to Miss Vandeker's knowledge of art after the coffee. Also, he considerably puzzled his host by a request that the damaged Velasquez in the Tiring Room should be very carefully removed from their frames and laid on the billiard-table. This request he did not make in the hearing of the American visitors, but in the private ear of Glenlevett alone. All the same, Miss Vandeker glanced uneasily from Beggarstaff to her father as she noticed the pictures lying on the billiard-table after dinner.

"What are you going to do?" she laughed. "Restore those faces to their pristine beauty?"

"Well, I am about to make an

experiment," Beggarstaff confessed. "But, first of all, I should like to tell you a little story. I was in New York on business about two years ago, on behalf of an artist friend of mine; and I heard a strange incident that happened in connexion with the picture department of the National Museum. It seems that the National Museum possesses, or did possess, a valuable collection of Da Vincis. One morning it was discovered that three of these pictures had practically perished in the night. They had all cracked and blistered and the pigment had faked off, just for all the world as if they had been scorched in a fire. It was thought at the time that the overheating of a stove had caused the mischief. I dare say you all notice how frequently anew and singular type of accident repeats itself.

"At any rate, practically the same thing happened with a pair of very fine Albrecht Dürers in the Boston Museum a few days later. The same explanation was given; and the pictures were disposed of for a nominal sum to some speculative dealer who had an idea that he might restore them. The whole thing might have passed off without further notice if my friend's suspicions had not been aroused by the knowledge that the same dealer had bought the damaged pictures in each instance. New York and

Boston are some way apart, as you know, so that the incident was significant. All the same, it was found impossible to trace the dealer; and there the matter would have ended if my friend had not discovered those four masterpieces in the possession of a rich land speculator who lives in Melbourne. I hope that I am not boring you, Miss Vandeker."

The girl was listening with every appearance of interest, only her face was a little pale, and she murmured something about the heat. Vandeker himself was smoking a green cigar, with a hand not so steady as it might have been. There was gloom in his eyes.

There is no mistake about it," Beggarstaff went on: "those are the self-same pictures, as my friend is in a position to testify. But they are no longer blistered and cracked. In fact, they are brilliant and fresh as the day they crossed the Atlantic. Now, it struck me when I heard Lord Glenlevett tell the story of his damaged Velasquez last night, that he had been the victim of the same ingenious fraud perpetrated in America. You see, as the Marquis is so frequently away from home, it would have been an easy matter for the swindler, in the disguise of a workman, to get into the house, and smear the pictures over with a mixture of sulphuric acid and elastic gum

arabic medium, which gives to the face of the painting the blistered appearance and the tattered shreds of paint which is almost an exact copy of a surface which has been damaged by fire. If the paint is very hard, a painter's flare-lamp is used to hasten the process, Miss Vandeker. Ninety-nine experts out of a hundred would declare at once that the picture was quite beyond all hope of restoration. Or the thing could be done in a different manner entirely, as it indeed was managed early in the spring in the North of England.

"Lord Glenlevett was speaking last night of a friend of his who suffered in the same way. He had arranged to let his house to an invalid American, who, being in very indifferent health, stipulated that he should try the house for a fortnight before finally making up his mind. As Miss Vandeker will readily guess, the house did not suit the invalid; and at the end of a week or two he moved on elsewhere. It was shortly after this that the Rembrandts proved to have perished; and within a few weeks a dealer came along, with the excuse that he wanted to purchase a small Romney to make up a pair. As a matter of fact, he purchased the damaged Rembrandts instead, precisely in the same way as the dealer served Lord Glenlevett here."

"Did you say the same dealer?"

Miss Vandeker asked with a curious catch in her voice.

"We shall come to that presently," Beggarstaff replied drily. "Knowing what I know, my suspicions were aroused last night; and on my arrival in town this morning I paid a visit to the expert who is a presiding authority in the Prints Department of the British Museum. As I quite expected, he knew all about the dodge in question, and explained to me exactly how it is done. I propose to show you my powers as a picture-restorer."

So saying, Beggarstaff crossed the room and rang the bell. A servant came in presently, bearing a couple of hot flatirons on a tray. From one of his pockets Beggarstaff produced a small bottle of amber-coloured liquid and a piece of cotton-wool, with which implements he treated the face of one of the damaged Velasquez lying on the table. Then on the face of the paint he laid a large sheet of greasy tracing paper, finally applying the iron over the whole surface. The paper came away easily, and Beggarstaff turned with a flourish to his host.

"Behold a miracle!" he said. "That which five minutes ago was a mere mass of brown blisters and hanging shreds of paint is once more the joy of nations. Tell me, Lord Glenlevett, do you see the slightest difference between the picture now and the picture

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"Behold a miracle!" he said "That which five minutes ago was a mere mass of brown blisters and hanging shreds of paint is once more the joy of nations. Tell me, Lord Glenlevett, do you see the slightest difference between the picture now and the picture

as it was six months ago? While you are trying to find out I will proceed to treat the other picture in the same way. Come, Miss Vandeker, I think you will have to admit that I have done my best for the sake of your art education."

"Well, I should say!" the girl gasped. "This is the most amazing thing! Did you ever see anything like it, poppa?"

Vandeker had turned away to the side-table in the mullioned window, and appeared to be deeply interested in the manufacture of brandy-and-soda. Beggarstaff could see that he had slopped some half-pint of the pungent liquor on the floor.

"This is marvellous!" the Marquis cried. "I cannot see the slightest flaw in the picture. It must take an expert hand to produce such a wonderful result."

"Not at all," Beggarstaff said. "As a matter of fact, there was nothing the matter with the picture at all. It is only the acid and the elastic medium working together that produced those cracked blots on the face of the paint. A little spirit easily removes them, and a hot iron finishes the work. The beauty of this swindle is the extreme simplicity."

Sadie Vandeker sidled up to Beggarstaff and laid her fingers on the back of his hand. He could feel the flesh burning like a

fever. He noticed how quickly the girl was breathing.

"Say," she almost whispered, "have you quite finished? Are there to be any revelations or exposures, or something nice and neat and dramatic in that way?"

"That all depends," Beggarstaff said gravely. "As a matter of fact, I have not quite finished with the revelations. I have here two rolls of canvas which I am sure will be exceedingly interesting to Lord Glenlevett. I will lay them on the table and ask him if he has seen them before."

The canvas cylinders were spread out on the table, and the Marquis gave a sharp cry of delight.

"My lost Velasquez!" he exclaimed. "The very pair that rascal cheated me out of! Why, my dear sir, they are absolutely none the worse for their adventure! You are a clever fellow, Beggarstaff, but your ingenuity in this matter fairly staggers me. How on earth did you manage to find the name of the man who played that sorry trick upon me? If I decide to prosecute him——"

A little gasping cry came from the girl by Beggarstaff's side. She laid her hand on his arm again, as if mutely asking for protection.

"Take me into the hall, or I guess I'll faint," she whispered. "Ah, that is better. I dare say you noticed it, but I am mightily

mistaken if the belted Earl tumbled to it after all. It's a bit of a shame, too, to play it low down on a real, gilt-edged white man like that. I guess it is just in your power to play pitch-and-toss with poppa and myself, but I hope there won't be a mighty fine exposure after all these revelations."

Beggarstaff's duty was plain before him, but he hesitated with those pleading eyes turned upon him.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "I don't see the slightest use. In cases of this kind a vulgar exposure destroys the delicate comedy, don't you think? Besides, seeing that the *Celtic* sails for New York on Monday——"

"I understand," Sadie said gently.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COMPLEAT LETTER-WRITER

"WHAT I want," Beggarstaff explained smoothly, "is to see Mrs. Glennie, widow of the late Captain Charles Glennie, V.C., who perished under such romantic and melancholy circumstances in South Africa. Unless the Directory is wrong, I appear to have come to the right address."

The natty and admirably starched parlourmaid hesitated just for a moment, and a splash of colour was painted on her cheeks. Beggarstaff advanced a

step or two forward, as if taking the success of his errand for granted.

"I see I am quite right," he went on. "Here is my card. I will not detain Mrs. Glennie for many minutes."

The parlourmaid led the way into a drawing-room of lilliputian dimensions. Small as the place was, it was furnished with every evidence of good taste; and it was quite clear that the occupant of the flat was a lady. She came in a moment later, holding Beggarstaff's card, her demure, rather pleading eyes turned inquiringly upon his face. As for the rest, Mrs. Glennie was small and slender. Her half-mourning, shaded off with violet, suited her fair beauty to perfection.

"It is very awkward," Beggarstaff muttered. "You see, I am not here from my own choice at all. I dare say my name is more or less familiar to you, as it is to most people in London."

The widow lifted her head ever so daintily. There was not much in the gesture, but it conveyed subtly to Beggarstaff that Mrs. Glennie regarded him in the light of a successful charlatan.

"It was a client of mine who asked me to come here. I may say I had some difficulty in discovering your address. Lady Oystermouth wrote to my client, Mrs. Sanderson, and mentioned yours as a deserving case. You

may just possibly be aware of the fact that Mrs. Sanderson is exceedingly wealthy and charitable, and indeed yours is the sort of sad circumstance that is most likely to appeal to her. Therefore, she asked me to come and see you."

"But how did you discover my address?" the widow asked innocently. "I have only been here for two or three days."

Beggarstaff waived the question aside.

"I don't think it matters," he said. "You will pardon me if I keep this matter upon an entirely business footing. You have no pension, I presume, or anything of that kind?"

Mrs. Glennie drew an exaggerated cobweb in the shape of a handkerchief from her pocket, and wiped her eyes with a down-stroke which is peculiar to the stage. Beggarstaff smiled to himself. He began to scent unexpected comedy here.

"My dear was terribly extravagant," the widow murmured. "He had not the least idea of the value of money. His people were terribly upset when he married me, for you see I am only the daughter of a poor country parson. My pride prevents me from appealing to my husband's people; and after his death I had to sell all my furniture, and give up the house in York Terrace. At the present moment I am quite at

the end of my resources, and fifty pounds would be my salvation. I have been promised an appointment in India at the end of the year, but how I am going to live till then I don't know. It is a terrible state of things."

The handkerchief came into play again, the pretty little face grew sad and weary. Beggarstaff murmured his sympathy. He was exceedingly good at that kind of thing.

"I have no doubt that can be managed," he said. "Mrs. Sanderson has every confidence in me, and will do exactly what I tell her; and, after all, fifty pounds is an exceedingly modest amount. Would you mind providing me with a pen and ink, so that I may make a few notes? Just as well in matters like this, don't you think, to have a reference? Not that I propose to let your friends know anything about the present state of your affairs. It is possible to do things in a much more delicate way than that."

The widow dried her eyes on the infinitesimal handkerchief, and set out briskly in the direction of the dining-room. There was a writing-table there, she explained. The apartment was smaller, if possible, than the drawing-room, but furnished in the same good taste.

Beggarstaff noticed a pile of letters all ready stamped and addressed on the table. As he

touched the stack of correspondence the highly glazed envelopes slipped, and it was possible for him to obtain a casual glance at the addresses. He noticed that every envelope appeared to be written in a different hand, and that all of them were intended for the wealthy and charitable. Beggarstaff rose at length, and placed his notebook in his pocket. Then his glance fell upon a large photograph of a soldier in uniform, which occupied a place of honour over the mantelpiece.

"My poor dear boy," Mrs. Glennie murmured, having recourse once more to the fractional handkerchief. "Taken in South Africa, and sent to me only a few weeks before Charlie's death."

"A very good likeness, I should say," Beggarstaff remarked.

"Oh, excellent! What one might call a speaking likeness."

It was a good face, Beggarstaff thought: resolute and clear-cut, and yet with a suggestion of the dreamer about the eyes. There was the mark of a sabre-cut across the forehead, which rather added to the romantic side of the picture.

"I understand that your husband was in some way related to Mrs. Sanderson," Beggarstaff said. "In fact, Mrs. Sanderson rather expected him to marry a niece of hers. She intimated to me that there was almost an engagement between the two at one time"

"My husband told me something about it," Mrs. Glennie said hastily. "Well, Margaret, what do you want?"

The accurately starched parlourmaid stood in the door way. She evidently had something of importance to say.

"Please, mum," she stammered, "cook says she's got the lamb cutlets; but the greengrocer tells her that he can't possibly get any asparagus to-day. The champagne has come and the Apollinaris. Will you wait for Miss Malcolm, or shall cook serve up lunch at one o'clock as usual?"

"Don't you wait for me," a clear voice said from outside. "I have got a bothersome rehearsal call for half-past twelve. See you at the *Savoy* at eight to-night, old girl. Ta-ta!"

Beggarstaff told himself that a blush was exceedingly becoming to his companion.

"Hope I am not in the way," he said. "I quite sympathise with you in the matter of the shortage of asparagus. I don't mind admitting that that vegetable is a weakness of my own."

"It sounds dreadfully extravagant," Mrs. Glennie murmured. "But then Miss Malcolm is a dear old friend of mine; and I am almost ashamed to say that she is the founder of the feast to-day. She occupies the flat which is above my own."

"Well, I will not detain you any longer," said Beggarstaff. "Allow me to post those letters for you. You may rest assured that Mrs. Sanderson will do all I recommend her to do in regard to your pathetic case. I wish you good morning."

Beggarstaff went thoughtfully back to Tyburn Square. Nevertheless, an amused little smile trembled at the corners of his lips. He put the whole thing out of his mind altogether once he was back at business. It was an exceedingly busy morning, and the Seer was looking forward to his lunch when a late visitor arrived. He came in with a shy, diffident air assumed by most of Beggarstaff's clients—the air of a man who is doing something excessively foolish against his better judgment. He was a fine figure of a man, and unmistakably a soldier. There was a healthy tan on his face, which spoke of recent service under foreign suns. He dropped uncomfortably into one of the saddlebag armchairs, and proceeded incoherently to tell his story. He did not notice that Beggarstaff was making frantic efforts to suppress an outburst of laughter.

"Now, let me quite understand you," the Seer said. "It is all a misunderstanding. You wrote the letter which the young lady never received, and she replied in a communication that did not

reach your hands. It does not seem to occur to either of you that it would have been a wonderful thing to receive or have delivered any one letter which proceeded from South Africa, or vice versâ, during the time of the war. You want me to tell you if I think the lady's affections are still unchanged?"

"I dare say you think me a great fool," the visitor said frankly. "I am not boasting, mind, and I've got as much pluck as most men, but I'd rather do anything than face Ada Kingsley unless I was pressured of my ground. Now, I want you to find out for me——"

"I understand," Beggarstaff nodded. "I am to act as a kind of scout on the field of Cupid. But first let me ask you a question. There is no incumbrance in the way, I suppose? No soft and blue-eyed enchantress waiting for her soldier boy?"

"Don't know what you mean," the visitor snapped. "I suppose you ain't trying to pull my leg, because, if you are, I call it a piece of deuced impertinence on your part!"

"*Festina lente*," Beggarstaff said calmly. "I know you military men; and, what is more to the point, I know you. You must know that the Seer of Tyburn is omnipotent. Nothing escapes his eagle eye. So, therefore, Captain Charles Glennie,

V.C., and all the rest of it, you must be candid with me."

"The fellow is mad," the visitor murmured—"absolutely mad!"

"Nothing of the kind," Beggarstaff laughed. "Oh, you professional bigamist, you philanderer, you desecrator of loving women's hearts! Mrs. Charles Glennie is at the present moment ready to meet you at a little flat in King's Gardens, which is Chelsea way."

"Mad," the other man murmured—"mad as a hatter!"

"Have a cigarette?" Beggarstaff exclaimed. "Take a dozen cigarettes. This is one of the finest bits of comedy I have ever come across in the whole course of my chequered career. So you decline to return to the bosom of the family?"

"There is no bosom of my family," the other man cried. "And if you say I have a wife, then I challenge you to produce her, and let us meet face to face."

"I take you," Beggarstaff cried. "Have you anything particular to do this evening? No? Then I'll tell you what we will do. We'll dine at the Savoy Hotel with your wife this very night."

CHAPTER XIX

THE UNATTACHED HUSBAND

It was getting towards the end of the season now, so that the smart

crowd which usually filled up the *Savoy* dining-room fell far short of the restricted 365 diners, which is the limit, beyond which the executive do not go. It was possible, therefore, for Beggarstaff to arrange his little coup so that, so to speak, he could sit in the stalls with an uninterrupted view of the performance.

It was a few minutes to eight when Beggarstaff entered the dining-room at the *Savoy*, accompanied by Captain Charles Glennie. Already the majority of the diners were in their places; the red-shaded lamps gleamed on flowers and glass and silver; also, incidentally, upon pretty faces, and necks and shoulders of ivory. Beggarstaff took a sweeping glance of the *mise en scène*, but so far as he could gather the lady of the violet eyes and the infinitesimal pocket-handkerchief was not yet present. Beggarstaff had had some difficulty in inducing his companion to regard the imbroglio from the proper, humorous point of view, but now he was sufficiently rewarded to see a grim smile on the face of the captain. A moment later two perfectly dressed women came into the room, and crossed to a table laid for two under one of the big palms. The women seemed to find favour in the eyes of Captain Glennie, for he regarded them with critical approval through his eyeglass.

"Taking little woman in the black and blue," he said. "Do you happen to know who she is?"

"Of course I do," Beggarstaff said promptly. "My dear fellow, that is your long-suffering wife! Don't you feel yourself a monster when you come to realise that you have neglected so beautiful and loving a creature as that?"

"I suppose I ought to," Glennie laughed. "My dear chap, I am positively looking forward to the adventure now. What is the next item on the programme?"

Beggarstaff briefly explained the plan of campaign. His idea was to saunter up to the table, and accost the blue-eyed widow with an air of pleased surprise and anticipation. He hoped that the azure-eyed one in question would ask him to share the same table. Up to a certain point the programme passed off without a hitch. This was a dear friend, Miss Malcolm, Mrs. Glennie explained. Miss Malcolm had had a slice of luck lately, and the dinner was born of the fortuitous opportunity. If Beggarstaff was dining, how delightful it would be if he could see his way to share the same table!

"That's all right," Beggarstaff said cheerfully. "Delighted, I'm sure. Here, waiter, lay a couple more places here! I forgot to explain that I have a friend;

but you will not mind us making up a quartette? My chum has just come back from South Africa."

"A soldier!" Mrs. Glennie gushed. "We shall be pleased!"

Beggarstaff crossed the room, and beckoned Glennie to follow him.

"Permit me to introduce my friend," Beggarstaff said. "Captain Charles Glennie—Mrs. Glennie. Rather a singular coincidence, is it not, that you should bear the same name? Miss Malcolm, let me present the captain to you."

Miss Malcolm's pretty eyes looked up sweetly. Apparently she knew nothing of the comedy which was going on almost within the radius of her own subtle perfume. But Mrs. Glennie rose to her feet, and clutched the edge of the table. Just for a moment she was absolutely dumbfounded. The whole thing was a wild practical joke, she thought, one of the kind of things for which the Seer of Tyburn was justly famed. But then there was no getting over the serious face of Charles Glennie, V.C., whose features had been looking down upon the blue-eyed widow from the mantelpiece any time the last six months. Then the comedy of it appealed, with irresistible force, to the lighter side of the woman's nature, and she laughed.

"It is indeed a strange coinci-

dence," the woman said. "Fancy both of us having the same name! My husband was a Captain Glennie; but I do not like to talk of him—at least I do not like to talk about him here. It seems so indelicate."

"I can quite understand your feelings," Glennie said significantly. "What regiment did your husband belong to?"

"The 11th. Greys," Mrs. Glennie stammered.

"So do I," the other said coolly. "It is quite evident that we have not yet exhausted the full series of coincidences. Was his name Charles—Charles Edward?"

Mrs. Glennie looked up demurely. Her face was sad and weary, yet there was infinite mischief lurking in her blue eyes. She began to feel more sure of her ground now. She did not need any one to tell her that she was dealing with two gentlemen, and that neither of them was in the least likely to give her away.

"Wonderful!" she murmured. "My husband's name was Charles Edward Glennie. Do you really mean to say that you possess the same pair of Christian names as my dear boy?"

"Well, yes," the captain said. "Your dear boy and myself appear to have been both singularly fortunate in possessing parents capable of giving us good, sound working names without

too much romantic bias about them. But let us carry the thing a bit further. Was your husband also a V.C.?"

"This is overpowering," Mrs. Glennie said. "A little more Chablis, thank you. My sainted husband was a V.C. Do you mean to tell me that you are also entitled——"

"It is even so," Glennie said solemnly. "One more question, and I have finished. Did your husband disappear after the disaster at Vals Gripp, and was his body ever found?"

"It fills me with grief to think of it," Mrs. Glennie replied. "Charles Edward perished in the manner you have indicated."

"So did I," Glennie said coolly "at least, that was the popular supposition. As a matter of fact, I was severely wounded in the head, and for some time I lost my identity. I was away up on the high veld with some Boers, who looked after me fairly well; and I might have been there still, but a doctor happened along, and operated upon me successfully. Then I came back to England, and found that I was looked upon as dead. Don't you think it just possible that this extraordinary string of coincidences may eventually culminate in the return of your particular brand of Charles Edward? Eh, Mrs. Glennie?"

The blue eyes were brimming over with mischief as they glanced

across the table in the speaker's direction. The other girl seemed to be listening with no more than ordinary polite attention. Beggarstaff was bending over his entrée with the air of a man fully conscious of the importance of the moment.

"Are you enjoying your dinner?" Mrs. Glennie asked.

"My dear madam, my enjoyment is completely absolute. I cannot recollect a moment when I appreciated the joy of existence more. There is one thing which strikes me—a point which you seem to have forgotten. I am alluding to the extraordinary likeness between your late lamented husband and my friend Charles Edward. You must ask him to tea at your flat, and show him the photograph which I admired this morning. He really ought to see it."

Mrs. Glennie leant back in her chair, and murmured sweetly that she would be only too pleased to receive Captain Glennie any afternoon he liked to call. She sipped her coffee with an air of happy enjoyment, with a conscience free from reproach.

"Do you know, Mr. Beggarstaff, there are the elements here of a very pretty comedy?" she said. "I see Mr. Haddon, the dramatist, is dining over there with a lady in black. Can't we call him into consultation, and ask him to give us his advice on

the subject of a play? I am quite sure that he will write it."

"No, no," Beggarstaff protested. "The ingenuity of the plot is entirely due to you. It is so original too."

"But what is the use of a plot," Mrs. Glennie protested, "unless you get your striking tableaux in the third and fourth acts? You will not deny that the engineering of these striking situations is entirely due to you."

"We must have the heroine's side of the story, too," Glennie said. "When she forgets herself, and does that which the law regards as wrong, we must gain the sympathy of the audience by showing that she was driven to it, so to speak. You can always get a stage audience to forgive a heroine, especially when she has lovely blue eyes like Mrs. Glennie's. She confesses her little peccadilloes to the hero in the third act. This is only the second act, so that the absolution does not come till to-morrow."

"Quite right," Beggarstaff said cheerfully. "It is the correct thing for the heroine to ask the hero to have tea at her flat. By the way, as you have the tea and also the flat——"

"Two flats," Glennie corrected *sotto voce*.

"It shall be as you say!" Mrs. Glennie cried. "I shall be delighted if you will both come round to-morrow afternoon about

five, and have tea with me. Unfortunately, Miss Malcolm will not be able to be present. Shall we call it a bargain? And now, as I understand the Empire is really worth going to——”

CHAPTER XX

THE CUP THAT CHEERS

ONE naturally expects a soldier to know something of strategy, especially a soldier who has learnt his art on the lurid plains of South Africa; and Beggarstaff was not surprised to find that Captain Glennie had anticipated his visit to the little flat in King's Gardens by half an hour. At least, Beggarstaff judged it to be that time, for the gallant captain had finished his second muffin, and the hot water had been poured into the teapot. These were the little signs by which Beggarstaff judged so much, and which added so greatly to his reputation.

He, however, made no charge of treachery. He was not blind to the fascinating appearance of his hostess in an elaborate tea-gown of black lace trimmed with violet.

“No; I don't care for any tea,” he said. “If you don't mind I will pollute the sanctity of a young widow's grief with the perfume of a cigarette. If I remember rightly, we were to meet here to discuss the third act of our little comedy.”

“You are a little late,” Mrs.

Glennie said sweetly. “But still you have been so nice and kind about the whole affair that I will recapitulate the whole thing for you. But, in the first instance, I will ask you to be good enough to inform your friend Mrs. Sanderson that the unfortunate lady in whom she was pleased to be interested is no more. She died this afternoon. At least, you understand what I mean. Perhaps I had better tell you my story.”

“I am sure it will be interesting,” Beggarstaff murmured.

“Well, it is. I told you yesterday that I was the daughter of a poor country clergyman, and that is a fact. When my father died, I became a governess. Let me tell you incidentally that good looks are not a valuable asset for a governess. Mrs. Grundy, in the shape of the modern British matron, does not favour beauty in her dependants. I do not wish to go into details over my life during the last three years, but one thing I resolved upon: Nothing would induce me to take up the same line of life after I left my last situation. I tried many ways of getting a living, till at length I was reduced to despair and the writing of begging letters. It is wonderful how easily one can come down to that kind of thing after the first plunge is made; but perhaps I had the trick of it. Perhaps my pathetic little touches had the desired

effect. At any rate, I woke up one morning to the knowledge that I had struck an excellent way of making a permanent income. Of course, you will understand that I had frequently to change my name, and gradually my geographical knowledge of London suburbs became exceedingly extensive. Mind you, I am not excusing myself. It is a great effort to me to make this shameful confession; but you two gentlemen have been so kind that I feel that I can do nothing less."

"Pray don't distress yourself," Glennie murmured.

"Oh, I must go through it now!" the woman said. "It is about six months ago since I read in the papers all about the death of the tragic hero who sits opposite me. It was an easy matter to procure a photograph and get it enlarged. When I came to ask a few questions, I found that Captain Glennie had very few near relations, so that it was easy enough to pass myself off as his wife, especially when I was appealing for assistance to those whom I knew would not be in the way of asking a lot of awkward questions. Of course, it never occurred to me for a moment that Captain Glennie was alive all this time; and when you presented him to me last night at the *Savoy Hotel* I nearly fainted. It is exceedingly good of you both not

to betray me to Miss Malcolm, who is a very nice girl, and really regards me as a perfectly honest woman, living on a small pension. Fortunately, she is short-sighted, and did not remark Captain Glennie's natural likeness to his own photograph. But tell me, Mr. Beggarrstaff, did you suspect me to be a heartless impostor when you called here yesterday afternoon?"

Beggarrstaff smiled and nodded his head.

"Well, perhaps not quite at first," he admitted. "But I must confess that the little touch about the lamb cutlets and the asparagus, to say nothing about the champagne, gave me pause. Young widows in distressed circumstances do not as a rule eat asparagus in August, neither do they indulge in champagne. You must admit also that the episode of the *Savoy* dinner rather gave you away. There is another matter which put me on the track. You will remember those letters that you gave me to post."

The fictitious Mrs. Glennie's face grew a little paler. There was a frightened look in her eyes.

"I had forgotten those letters," she whispered. "I hope to goodness you omitted to post them!"

"I haven't posted them," Beggarrstaff said. "I couldn't very well do so after Captain Glennie had called upon me in the way of business, and I had recognised

him. You see, he came to see me to consult me with reference to a little matter——"

"Oh, shut up!" Glennie growled. "I was a fool to think about it. And whilst we are on the matter, Beggarstaff, you need not pursue your enquiries any further in a certain direction. I have changed my mind. But we are interrupting Mrs. ——"

The presiding deity of the flat looked up, and they all laughed gaily together. Then the woman took up the story again.

"I am glad those letters are not posted," she said. "I want you to destroy them. There are going to be no more lamb cutlet and asparagus episodes for me. There is one way in which I can get a living, and I am going to take it up. I have quite made up my mind to become a hospital nurse."

"Hard work," Glennie growled. "Hard work and precious little fun, I can tell you. I saw quite enough of a nurse's life in South Africa to convince me of that. I am quite sure if you will leave matters in my hands I can manage to find you something a great deal more congenial, not to say remunerative. If I may be allowed to call here now and then, and discuss the matter with you, I shall be delighted. It will be a positive pleasure to me."

The desire of permission was gracefully accorded, and a little

time later Beggarstaff and Glennie left the flat together. The soldier walked along gloomily, as if he had something on his mind that troubled him. Then he spoke abruptly.

"Look here, Beggarstaff. It's no use you going on with that Ada Kingsley business. I was lunching at the club to-day; and I find that Ada is not only engaged to another man, but that the marriage day is absolutely fixed. And, funny enough, I don't seem to care a bit now, though I was keen when I came to see you yesterday."

"Then there's no harm done," Beggarstaff said. "Only don't forget the old proverb about hearts being caught on the rebound. You are in the susceptible condition just now, when you are likely to get a bad attack of Dan Cupid at any moment; and if I were you I should allow the charming lady who has paid you the compliment of annexing your name to slide for the present. Of course, I am quite disinterested in this advice. In the words of Sam Weller's father: 'Beware of the vidders'!"

"But she isn't a widow, you fool!" Glennie said hotly. "Besides, I am old enough to look after my own business. Now what do you say to walking with me as far as the Naval and Military, and having a whisky-and-soda?"

* * *

Beggarstaff was idly turning over his correspondence, and trying to make up his mind where he should spend his Christmas holidays. He took up an envelope at length, the writing of which was strange and, at the same time, quite familiar to him. Then it dawned upon his understanding with a flash of illumination.

"By Jove! the widow!" he murmured—"the syren of King's Gardens! I wonder if she has been getting into any more scrapes lately? I wonder how the hospital nursing is getting on? Incidentally, I wonder, also, what has become of the gallant captain?"

Beggarstaff lighted a cigarette, and leisurely removed the letter from the envelope. He leant back in his chair, and read half aloud the epistle as follows:

"DUNKELL LODGE,
WIMBORNE, SURREY.

"MY DEAR MR. BEGGARSTAFF,
—I dare say you will wonder why you have not heard from me for so long. Believe me, I am not ungrateful for your past kindnesses. You will, perhaps, be interested to hear that the hospital nursing was not

a success, though I gave it a thorough trial for three months. However, I thought I would try my hand at private nursing, and, strangely enough, my first patient was Charles Edward—I mean Captain Glennie. I was very successful in his case. Indeed, he declares that I am a born nurse, and that he could not possibly get along without me. You see, his old wound is rather troublesome, and he wants constant attention. So, therefore, there was nothing for it except to comply with his wishes. Of course, we could not go on in that indefinite way, so I agreed to marry Charles Edward; and we have now been husband and wife for the last three months. I should have written you before, only we went abroad hurriedly. Anyway, I should like you to judge for yourself as to how happy we are; and we shall be greatly disappointed if you do not come down here to spend your Christmas. Let me have a telegram, and believe me,
"Yours (this time *truthfully*) very sincerely,

"VIOLET GLENNIE."

"Hang me if I don't go!"
Beggarstaff said energetically.

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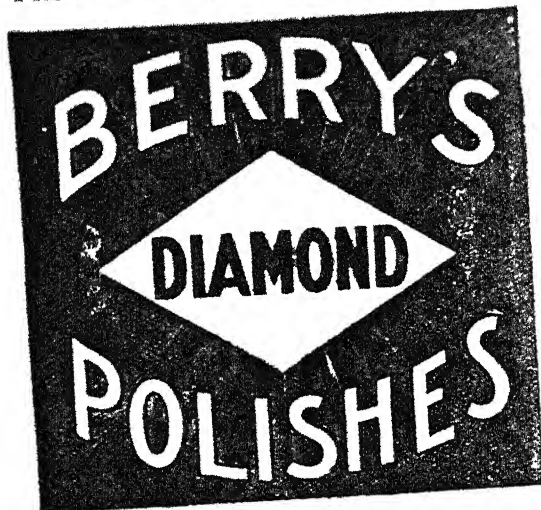
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